Lines in the Sand

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Pros? Well... he's not dead.

Cons? Looking up at worried, amaranthine purple eyes and short horns, feeling the heavy weight of a- something- idly moving behind his back... he decided to go back to sleep. If he absolutely had to be Shukaku, the most idiotically tragic tanuki to ever walk the face of the earth, then he could at least do it after a good night's rest.

Shukaku/Ichibi SI

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Primary Specific Samsaric Error

Chapter 1: Primary Specific Samsaric Error

A primary specific samsaric error… didn't happen often. Or really, *at all* . The set of requisite circumstances to pierce the inherent protections of the soul and corrode the barrier between life and past, now and *then* - to hold memories beyond the mortal coil and reintegrate them into the newborn life… Long. *Exhaustively* long, and oftentimes weirdly specific.

So, this begins with weird specificities. He should have expected that, really- his life had been nothing but a mix of incredibly odd and enduringly mundane since his first memories. A lost toe in first grade, accidentally swapped with another's and reattached to the wrong person. Mediocre grades, with an inkling that he *might* - note: wasn't- advanced in mathematics.

A best friend who went missing for two and a half months, only to return and reveal he'd been with his father on their dairy farm. A stable group of three companions- including the missing milkman- and a decent, if somewhat introverted social life during middle school.

An older sister who decided to go on a long distance business trip to Venezuela five and half months after he saw her talking to military personnel at twelve thirty in the morning. Five postcards and the occasional video call, congratulating him on his six A's and the one B- in psychology.

Dying of hyper-aggressive *heart* cancer at nineteen- tumors arrhythmically spread across his body day by day- numb, the sound of his breathing the only way to know he still *was* . …there wasn't really anything to balance that out. At least his professors had been willing to give him some extensions, so… highest grades he'd gotten so far?

His vision started to fuzz around the edges, and he sighed, hearing the soft sound in the hospital's empty silence. He really felt like he should have expected something like this…

A world away two brothers stood on broken rocks, staves clutched in nervous grips, half the power of a god in duplicate roaring beneath their skin as they stared down the monstrous form of their mother's dream.

Their *nightmare* .

On the sixth of January, some time after his sight faded, but not before he could no longer feel the *cold* , the icy dread that tickled at his misplaced toe and failing organs-

A boy died.

"Your dream is *over* , Mother!" A rumbling roar- the crashing roar of a soulless beast given soul, an abomination of nature twisted over-desire for power, for chakra already lost. A seal in three hundred and sixty one scintillating iridescent lines, characters flowing like water over oil under the light of an empty sky. "The people deserve to be free! Please-" his voice cracked even as his chakra shrouded around him like the weight of the world- "please…"

A hand gently brushed the side of his horn, soft tremors hidden by the mere act of comfort. "She's *gone* , Hagoromo. The God Tree has exerted its dominion over her." A different seal, no less powerful, flickered into existence over robes. "And mother… if you can hear this…" two palms slammed down onto the bound abomination, brilliant with the force of their chakra. "We're sorry it had to come to this."

The world *shuddered* . A *point* - a singularity of force sparked into existence far above the battlefield, the very continent beneath them

peeling off the face of the earth like so much dust and ruin. A worm-like white, the essence of abomination, the soul of a woman who had ate the cumulation of the god tree's cruel reign and ascended to little more than chakra itself *twisted* free from the Juubi in the same moment its mortal being slammed into Hagoromo.

Chakra- *so much energy* , unlimited and immense- rushed through his tenketsu, pooling at the locus of inevitability around his eight gate. Without his mother's influence, it was just a drone- advanced, viscous and capable, but *soulless* .

The Juubi was trapped.

A breath caught on the settling sound of crumbling rock, replaced by aborted laughter, then choked giggles. "We *did* it. We actually did it. I didn't think we'd live to see the sunrise."

Hagoromo smiled slightly- it had been far, *far* too long since they'd been able to laugh like that. Looking out over the continent that was more dirty gray and ashen brown then the vibrant green it *should* be… it might be a long time yet again.

He smiled- watched the moon rise for the first time- felt the ten-tails shifting within him, ever probing in impatient patience. He smiled.

A soul swept through the unrelenting torrents of samsara, that cyclical loop, ever onwards to some unseeable past and future. In [here] where time meant less than the letters of a name, and a name meant less than the illusion of continuity, the soul drifted with a million others of itself, an infinity of others.

A faint essence of *not-theirs* colored-

A bit of wispy something, from being caught at the edge of *being* for a moment too long, held by the dying grasps of a tenacious parasite.

Emotion, a flicker of it- gentle and confused. Sorrow caught in the blurred edge of *dead* and the next thing off. It didn't *want* sorrow.

For a single moment, an endless second and an eon unlimited, it *wanted* , and in wanting was infinitely more *alive*-

---

The walls between life and death are already weak under the clever use of chakra- the immortality of nature, in congruence with the possibility of soul? To those who possessed the absolute height of power… it made *anything* possible.

Ootsutsuki Hagoromo stood in a sealed chamber two and a half miles beneath the waste-lands, chakra flickering in a pattern soothing to sore tenketsu. He *breathed* - in. Out. Shift. In. *Out* . The Juubi shifted in the space beneath his seal, responding to the simple stimuli.

Amaranthine eyes snapped open, and their gaze weighed the world. With absolute perfection of control he grasped the entire mass of the Juubi's chakra, feeling it squirm in a sort of inquisitive indecisiveness as he set it running through his body, pooling just before the eyes that broke samsara.

In the end, creation of all things was just a wish.

His palms clapped together with a deep thrum, a wave of dust blasted away from his furiously flared robe, rinnegan shining almost eerily bright in the cavern's darkness. With the whole of his being he focused on a *singlar desire*- he forgot his small village. His ninshu classes. The monks at the temple. The birds, chirping on a warm summer's day.

The waves- ever- moving.

Sound.

Hamura, pale eyes, mouthing- a warning to be careful.

The screaming of the Juubi.

The darkness of the chamber around him, the taste of dust on his tongue, cool air, light- and he spoke without *speaking*- “Become ***nine****!*”

To understand… that, was not his wish. He wished for the Juubi to be split into nine parts- not nine smaller Juubi clones, not nine portions of unthinking chakra to seal away beneath the bones of the earth, not nine mindless drones-

The Sage of Six Paths demanded nine *people* - and that was the final piece of the puzzle.

For all its impossible powers, chakra could not make a soul from nothing.

In that bleak, roaring nothingness swimming with all that would and wouldn’t, a shard of reality forced its way into death. A swirling vortex of energy- just a tinge of some greater work, the soul knew inherently- brushed its way over the currents of the wandering, gathering enough of an impression so it could *create its own* .

The power touched his- and his *want* - however faint and undirected, however it had barely just sparked- grabbed at the sheer essence of *possibility* and was swept along.

Even then, there was a final barrier to a primary specific samsaric error. To any normal being, even a chakra construct, the memories of a soul would have failed to imprint on the physical essence of their body. The bijuu were *not* chakra constructs, though- they were chakra itself, a universal law. In *being* , their souls were written immortal into the fabric of existence itself, and so that problem resolved itself rather neatly.

Smile playing softly across his lips, the Sage of Six Paths watched eight sets of eyes flicker open, flickering illumination cast from the last remnants of exhausted chakra in the air. “Hello,” he said softly to those who’d woken and the one who hadn’t. “My name is Ootsutsuki Hagoromo. I’m your father.”

Children. He’d wanted those for so… so long. His grin was the widest it’d been in years, looking at the eight small beastlings who watched him with adorable confusion… and the one tanuki that slept.

Unfolding

Chapter 2: Unfolding

And Shukaku, who knew the tragedy unfolding before them in the million untraceable patterns that made fate, dedicated himself to being ready.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He felt… feelings. That was certainly new- a wash of sensation prickling at the edge of his mind, whispered words on the edge of his hearing he couldn't quite parse. That was fine- hearing something was better than hearing nothing at all. He hadn't thought he'd wake up again after the last treatments had started to fail- they'd told him he'd die…

Exhaustion crept up on him and he slipped quietly to sleep once again, dreaming of open landscapes and freedom, fantastical beasts which looked down at him with concerned eyes. He dreamed of being more alive than he'd ever been before- he dreamed of ancient energy and flowering trees ever stretched to the sky; of the gentle breeze that would brush through the forest outside of his classroom.

A thousand things he didn't quite understand, and some he did- mundane, and not. It was a good dream- of warm things, gentle susurrations and quiet embraces. Happyness. Emotion, implacable, wrapped around him like a comforting blanket.

For a while, he slept and did not dream.

"...they barely wake. Do you see…" a lilting, melodic language- different from English, but no less intelligible "...not supposed to be

sick. How can a chakra construct get *sick* ?"

A muffled noise- laughter, he supposed, or maybe someone just got punched particularly hard. "The great and noble Sage of-"

"Shut up, Hamura-"

"-reduced to a fretting parent." Ah. That sound was *definitely* someone getting punched, followed by a few more mumbled words. "I'll take a look-" a faint spike of *intent-energy-potential* , the sensation of being *watched* then- numbness. Silence. "I can't see anything particularly wrong- the chakra network isn't human, but I didn't expect it to be." That had been exhausting- he was tired, so… so very tired.

Something in that sentence strained to grab his attention- he got the impression that it was critically important, but he just couldn't bring himself to grasp onto that thread of mind, wakefulness slipping past, into placid rest.

He dreamed of a room- in turns too small and far too vast. The weight of all his memories- the bookshelf half full, fitted neatly with a side of random trinkets. Disgustingly mint-green paint, the color he'd always hated… scratches on the door, hanging posters and stacked textbooks. Beyond the open door a vast, empty plain stretched far into the distance.

A step-

The rest of his dreams were a blur, colors and impressions mixing together in bewildering kaleidoscopic echoes. In one moment of particular clarity he sat opposite a cat that blazed with blue fire, watching it speak and hearing no words. It felt… familiar. Familial, despite its inhumanity…

Weakly, he grasped that thought- there was *something important about that thought* . His eyes met the cat's heterochromatic pair, and then he was adrift again- asleep, undreaming.

"...unbalanced yin energy…"

"...knowing what to look for-" that prickle of knowledge that he was being watched- "It's a lot better than it was just a month ago. They'll probably… …soon."

Those weren't medical terms.

Those *weren't medical terms* .

It was the first thing that'd properly *registered* since he'd slipped asleep for what *should* have been the final time, which was frankly a bit embarrassing because the next thing that registered was that he'd been ignoring that pesky *not human* designation for- probably, if this man was to be believed- over a month.

He shifted, and the conversation paused, replaced by a quiet shuffling and the tense air of expectation. This was… really hard. In that moment, his heart went out to all those who *didn't* die and had to go through the torture that would be physical therapy. Experimentally he twitched his limbs, shifting his arms and legs and letting his tail flop down-

Tail.

He didn't have the brainpower for this right now, but- *tail* . Groaning softly- a concerningly deep sound compared to what his voice *should* have been- he pried open his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't.

Pros? Well… he wasn't dead.

Cons? Looking up at worried, amaranthine purple eyes and short horns, feeling the heavy weight of a- something- idly moving behind his back... he decided to go back to sleep. If he absolutely had to be Shukaku, the most idiotically tragic tanuki to ever walk the face of the earth, then he could at least do it after a good night's rest..

"Tag!" That was the first- and to anything else would have been the last- word he heard as he woke up in that strange vastness, an orange paw slamming into his side with the force of a truck and bowling him right into the side of a burning cat. "You're supposed to *tag* her, not-"

"Kurama you *idiot!* " Matatabi shoved him off with a hiss of rage, stalking over to whack the kitsune over the head. "Little sibling is *delicate* ! Father said we can't play with them like that!"

"But-" Kurama looked about ready to cry. His brother. *Kurama* . He puffed himself up, tails floofing out behind his back. "They’re *here* - we're not dragging them into the mindscape- they actually came in themselves! Plus, I'm the big brother, so I'm in charge."

Matatabi's flames flared half their height again as she leapt onto Kurama's back with a cry of fury. "Older by *half a second* !"

A smirk. "Still older-"

"Doesn't matter if you're a *brat* -"

"Uncle Hamura said not to repeat-"

Nope. Not right now. If *this* was what the young bijuu were like... well, he could see how the original Shukaku developed a complex. Watching the two brawl, presence forgotten to the side, he decided that he *really* didn't need to deal with this right now- he had plenty of time in the future for his *eight* siblings. That thought alone was enough seem him neatly out of the shared mindscape.

He was fairly sure they didn’t even realize he’d left.

Several months passed in fairly busy monotony, for the most part sleep mixed with a few brief moments of wakefulness. Slowly, so painfully slowly, he began to get up and move about- his body rebelled at the action, and he was relatively sure the few villagers

that saw him were convinced he'd somehow managed to get drunk. At least *they* never had to get used to walking with a tail after a lifetime as a perfectly normal, non chakra-beast student.

The family visited often, if rarely in person- and they liked him well enough as the adorable little brother he was. Or, at least in Kurama's case, as a plushy ball of sand, just perfect for hugs and generalized torment.

The greatest part of those few months of recovery was- inevitably- Hagoromo. Father… infinitely patient, quiet and reserved yet perfectly firm, a glance able to quell even Son Goku's rage. He couldn't help but to love him despite that guilt, his open kindness and worldly magnificence, and the soft voice as he wove stories with the rising sunlight.

"Shukaku." He blinked, parsing the voice as he woke- feeling the faint sensation of a small hand nestled beneath his chin. "Son, the sun rises and the birds sing their songs. The wind whispers. Wake up." Gold eyes met rinnegan's deep gaze, and he couldn't help but smile. "Oh? Hello there, little Shukaku."

"...hello, Hagoromo."

"You can call me father."

Shukaku winced- there was still something… *off* about calling the legendary *Sage of Six Paths* father. He had a dad- perpetually punctual, never able to put down a book or a good cup of coffee, full of good humor at his job and distant bitterness at the mention of family. "I… sorry, father."

"You should have come with Gyuki to the wastes- Hamura was driving himself insane trying to fix the water table." He felt himself getting tugged into an embrace, small arms sinking a few inches into the sand of his form. "Shukaku. Son. I love-"

“I’m not.” His breath picked up in a few sharp gasps, sand shifting in agitation as he tried- and failed- to cringe back from the surprisingly strong hug. “I’m not Shukaku.” There. Simple enough- what was a secret to love? You didn’t have to wait for betrayal if you were the betrayer first.

Hagoromo stepped back, solemn- not disapproving, just… curious. Patient. “Oh? Then who are you?”

“I- I was human.” He was *pretty* sure there was supposed to be something about not telling people this sort of thing right away, but against those eyes that felt as if they could look through anything, against that soft embrace… “Nineteen years old, college student-” he paused, looking carefully for any sign of disapproval- for anything but the careful blankness spread across Hagoromo’s face. “I… knew some things about this world.”

“...really? What do you know about me?”

“Sage of Six Paths.” Hagoromo nodded softly, “revered as a god-”

Hagoromo’s eyes widened comically as he sucked in a deep breath, only to be sent into a coughing fit by the sand he’d inhaled. “A- a *god?* Me? If I had ever thought of breaking confidence in the first place, then *this* has convinced me otherwise well enough.”

A glance passed between them- “Hamura will never hear of this. Promise.” A smile cracked across his face and then they were laughing, peals of bright drifting through the effusive dawn.

“You always *were* the most mature of the children,” softly, a murmur barely audible even to his enhanced senses. A hand reached up, cusping the side of his nose- it was so easy to forget sometimes the strength slung easily across his staff, clasped tightly in the gudodama floating behind him like so many black stars. “Shukaku. Son. I will never hate you, never not love you, *no matter what*.”

“...why?”

A sigh, so weary. “You are *you*. Others may not be so understanding... but is it not the duty of the father to care for the son? To reject your trust would be the height of cruelty." His eyes lit up in excitement, and Shukaku tentatively smiled back. "Now- tell me about this past life of yours…” and for a while they spoke of cities to touch the sky, urban sprawls and global connections and *peace* .

Father and son.

Shukaku glared at the sand in front of him. Hands clasped in a careful seal, will focused to a singular purpose, he *pushed.*

The sand moved maybe… half an inch. If he was lucky.

A hoof pushed the sand- unfortunately *much* further than what he’d managed with his chakra. “Come *on* Shukaku. You promised you’d help me after you finished with your *boring* sand stuff. Please? Pretty-”

“Fine, Kokuo. Look, the chakra sharing ninshu is too advanced for *either* of us. Until we master some basic chakra exercises, father won’t even *consider* teaching you.”

“But you know *everything* .” Kokuo glanced up at him with that particularly needy face he’d perfected over the past odd year or so, and Shukaku couldn’t help but sigh in fond exasperation.

Even if his relationship with most of his elder siblings was… politely distant… he at least had ever-curious Kokuo to learn with. “I don’t know *everything* . I’ve just been putting a lot of work into learning from father- we both have a drive to see a world at peace.” Kokuo pouted, and Shukaku deftly pressed his tail into his forehead.

Maybe he shouldn’t be taking his familial advice from the person who’d slaughtered a clan who hadn’t even been founded yet. Oh well- it was certainly fun watching his pout turn to an adorable scowl

as he kicked at his sand- “You *brat!* Uncle Hamura brought that from the wastes-” with a cry of mock anger he threw himself at the horse.

“Hey! You can’t even use your sand-”

Shukaku whacked him over the head with his tail, and was whacked by Kokuo’s five in turn. “You can’t use boil release either!”

“I totally could!” Shukaku glanced at him with barely constrained incredulity, eliciting a quiet huff. “...if I wanted to. Yeah. I could boil you right up if I wanted to!”

“No you couldn’t.”

Kokuo deflated a bit. “Yeah, you’re right. Dummy.” A few rough minutes of detangling followed, until they were both sitting by the edge of the river as noon slipped past. “ What are you going to even do with sand? Like… make a desert?”

“I’m sure uncle would appreciate the help with the wastes, but no.” He grinned, and it was *sharp* . “I have a *plan* .”

“Fuuinjutsu?” Hagoromo arched a brow. “Are you sure?”

He bounced softly on his feet, trying not to look *too* excited. “Of course I am. Its potential is limitless- and I could apply seals so *easily* with my sand. Just… shape it right, then- seal!”

“Unlimited potential to lock away junk and blow yourself up more like it. I hope you understand that my sealing knowledge is… rudimentary at best.”

Shukaku hoped his gaze appropriately conveys the sheer *incredulity* he felt in that moment. “You sealed the *Juubi* . You sealed grandma *into the moon* . How can you be bad at sealing?”

He only smiled softly, serene as ever floating above his ring of gudodama. “Your uncle and I built both prisons off a storage seal. Gamamaru was an absolute annoyance about giving up the only stable seal he could get working.” It took an expert to see his subtle tells, but Shukaku had spent the better part of three years with him and could recognize the faint exasperated fondness around his eyes, the subtle… embarrassment? No.Impossible- the Sage of Six Paths did not get *embarrassed* . An embarrassed father was like a calm Son Goku- halfway between a dream and unthinkable. “If you think you can do something great with seals, then I’ll teach you. I’m sure you’ll far outshine me one day.”

“Some of the things they could do with seals in the future were frankly insane. There was one barrier that could contain the Juubi.”

Hagoromo’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. “ *Impressive* . How about this- you bully Hamura into fixing the chakra transfer spike with me, and I’ll get him to join us for fuuinjutsu lessons before…” he paused, then shook his head. “I’m certain it will be a fruitful endeavor-” but Shukaku could still see the faint lines of stress across his brow.

Perhaps…

It meant nothing.

Four years later Hamura bade them farewell from the mountaintop, the shimmering green light of the tensingan drifting around the forms of a hundred loyal Ootsutsuki vassals. He stopped by the bijuu, running a hand across each of their faces with a weary, so gentle expression. “I’ll see you again one day, children.” He stopped by Shukaku, tugging him- or really, his leg- into an embrace. “You too, kid. Keep working on your seals.”

Tensingan met the gaze of rinnegan, and disappeared in a flash.

Shukaku had never seen his father’s stress lines deeper. For once, he looked his age.

Kokuo paused at the entrance to his rough-hewn cavern, scoured out of the rock under the- *slowly* - increasing strength of his sand. “Hey… can you help me with that… chakra sticking? I *really* want to get to the transfer!”

Shukaku paused, looking up from where he’d been grinding fuuinjutsu ink. At the rate he was going, he wouldn’t be able to use his sand in seals for *years* . Bijuu sized reserves were a *pain*- he’d thought that, being made out of chakra… but no. He wasn’t so lucky- practice it was. “...sorry. Not today.”

Kokuo scowled softly, and walked away.

Ten years after he’d first opened his eyes as Shukaku, during a particularly warm spring morning- as cherry blossoms danced on the wind and the others- father included- *finally* managed to see the obvious, Ootsutsuki Hagoromo was engaged to his ‘not a girlfriend, I swear.’ Wise indeed.

She was a nice woman- calm, collected, and always willing to interact with them even when their squabbles drained lakes and shattered trees. Cheerful, too- Matatabi was never afraid to take her to the sea or the border of the wastes when she asked, and even Isobu opened up a little over the following years.

It was a nice time. Peaceful, for the most part, as people rebuilt after the Juubi’s rampage. There was an air of mundane peacefulness to the mountain glens, vast open plains and dense forests. Things settled into a rhythm of *normal* .

Matatabi would run, and run, and sometimes take her with.

Gyuki tried and failed to sing like his mother.

Isobu would watch as she wove small white garments, and demurely pester him for questions whenever he managed to put down his latest attempt at fuuinjutsu.

Shy, prideful Kurama kept his distance, always watching.

Son Goku broke stuff- as per the usual.

Chomei dreamed of the day she'd fly.

Kokuo pestered him, and then Hagoromo for training with his chakra, and managed an impressive level of control after a while, even if the chakra transfer technique still evaded him-

And Shukaku, who knew the tragedy unfolding before them in the million untraceable patterns that made fate, dedicated himself to being ready.

Ootsutsuki Indra was born on a cold winter's morning, to the excited eyes of nine immortals and their father not-deity, and the tired gaze of a mortal woman who felt the bite of Kaguya's Infinite Tsukuyomi far too heavy on her bones.

Ootsutsuki Asura was born ten months later to the solemn gaze of Shukaku and Hagoromo, and the pasty, too-pale zetsu white of a mother who'd given everything for her children.

FYI: In Kaguya's Infinite Tsukuyomi the people who stayed in it too long were turned into White Zetsu after everything that made them human was drained from them.

The Sage of Six Paths

Chapter 3: The Sage of Six Paths

“They kill each other.”

Hagoromo- his father grasped his hand, and pondered, implored so faintly- serene. “Be with them, then- trust your love will overcome hate. For an old man, eh?” He smiled, and Shukaku smiled back, unable to completely dispel the faint foreboding that laid heavy in his chest.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“They kill each other.”

Hagoromo- his father grasped his hand, and pondered, implored so faintly- serene. “Be with them, then- trust your love will overcome hate. For an old man, eh?” He smiled, and Shukaku smiled back, unable to completely dispel the faint foreboding that laid heavy in his chest.

It was only as he interacted with Indra- and later, Asura- that he realized how much of himself he’d lost in his reincarnation. It had already been somewhat obvious- his father, for all his power, barely came up to his chest, and the fine details inherent in sealing were *incredibly* annoying. Compared against Indra, though… it made it *real* .

He was not human. Objectively, he knew that. Subjectively, when a three year old Asura couldn’t understand why the villagers shied away from him as he tugged him through the town to the compound. When they’d slip out of his way with poorly hidden fear Indra would

glare at them with his adorably childish petulance, which really didn't do much to help.

He *understood* their wariness- the Juubi's apocalyptic rampage, fire and crimson terror fresh on their minds. For the most part he ignored them- but as much as he *wished* it didn't, it wore on him. On the cold nights sitting around a fireplace with Kokuo, the Sage and his children, conversation flowing freely- laughter on winds and gentle smiles, he could almost imagine- just going to the market. Speaking. A past of metal and machines, and none of that sickening *fear* .

When Indra turned five, he stopped leaving the Ootsutsuki compound, the last of the bijuu to do so. His father hugged him close after the celebration and whispered the platitudes he desperately needed to hear- and he desperately allowed himself to believe them.

The years grew long.

His father grew more distant after his wife's death. Not much- just a faint veneer of joy where it'd once been genuine and wholehearted, a wizened sage where there'd once been a man so overflowing with life and vibrancy. A hint of austerity, the flowers she'd always given him absent once again from his robes.

Aside from him Kurama was the only one who'd noticed- emotional sensing at its finest- but there was really nothing to do. After all, despite the almost uncharacteristic worry Kurama showed for his father- what can a twice-teenager suffering through the *exact same loss* hope to do? So, as the years dragged by he alternated between fuuinjutsu experiments and attempts to just… be there for the human part of his family.

Sighing, he set his brush to the side- careful not to knock over the small jar of ink resting to the side. He'd been growing, recently, shooting up almost a foot a year and the increasing difficulty he had with his Fuuinjutsu supplies was only an annoying reminder of the fact.

He was *not* looking forward to being the size of a city.

"Shuku!" A little kid skidded around the corner to knock into him, just *barely* avoiding the ink. "I did it! I- oh, is that your fuuinjutsu stuff? A storage… uh… something about size?" He shook his head, blinking to clear his thoughts as his shaggy locks flew everywhere. Indra was a cute kid when he got all earnest like this. "That's so cool! Look! I did it- you just have to harmonize your *internal* energies, like an inverse chakra transfer jutsu- then adjust the frequency to the the most prominent nature nature in your body…" his face furrowed in concentration as he held his hand out, a weak flame flickering into existence above his palm.

"Impressive!" Watching how he lit up at the rumbled praise, it was hard to see the incredible destruction that lay down that path. "I'm sure it'll be very useful- perhaps the potters and the cooks would appreciate a few techniques? I'll ask Kokuo to help you with your fire release."

Indra nodded seriously, letting the flame peter out with the last remnants of his chakra before rushing off in the other direction- far too excited to maintain his puppy-like facade of his father's cool demeanor. Shukaku just watched him leave with a faint look of pride somewhere in the vast complexity that was emotion- he'd never gotten to be a big brother, before.

…it was nice.

Sighing, he curled up and sank into the shared mindscape, tugging gently at Kokuo's presence until he stumbled into mindscape beside him with a faint nod of greeting. "Shukaku. It's been some time since you've last joined us."

A look of such resigned weariness slouched across his form, and Shukaku couldn't help but chuckle at his woe. "Matatabi?"

"Son Goku is *always* getting into fights with Gyuki, Matatabi makes a mess of the wastes whenever she goes out to run, and the others

are always climbing over each other to spend time with father. It's worse than the compound wall incident."

Shukaku snorted in barely restrained humor. "I *remember* that. Kurama jumped on top of Chomei to get into the compound early- and Isobu barely dodged Gyuki. Give them my regards when you manage to wrangle them into behaving."

"Nobody wrangles Kurama. He is the unwranglable."

"What about father?"

Kokuo looked heavenwards in fond exasperation. "Father doesn't *wrangle* Kurama- all he has to do is enter the room and the silly kitsune will melt into a puddle of happiness and general amicability." Shukaku thought back, and bit back a dopey smile at some of the fond memories. "...what did you need me for?"

"Indra managed to make a fire release ninshu, and I can't help him with that element. If you could, I'm sure he'd love the help." Kokuo's face was carefully blank for a moment before he sighed, nodding. "How you get them to like you, I'll never… for you Shukaku."

"I'm sure he can help with your chakra transfer ninshu-" and that was all he needed to say to get him to perk up right back up again. "How's that, by the way?"

"I'm getting *really* close! Father said that I have enough control for the receiving step, and I'm *almost* at the second stage of the connection…" for a few- minutes or hours, or just time immaterial, they spoke of memories and chakra and long days spent pursuing myriad interests, and when he dropped out of the mindscape he was content to ignore the future.

A month after Indra turned ten years old he got in a spat with Kurama over some inconsequential fire release technique- Shukaku hadn't heard what it was about more than the general idea of

'foxfire,' but it ended like most of their arguments did- with copious amounts of brawling.

Except- Kurama was the *kyuubi* , and Indra was a ten year old kid who proceeded to get summeraly defeated by a single swipe of his tail, two ribs and his arm broken as he was tossed into a tree. Father had come running, pulling them apart with his gudodama and sending Kurama away before healing Indra.

He scolded them both, afterwards, but Kurama avoided his youngest siblings after that.

Matatabi, as Shukaku understood from the time he spent with her, could care less about Indra, but disliked Asura with a fervent passion befitting her fiery nature. It was stupid, and illogical, but the absolute thrashing he received when he told them so disinclined him from pursuing it further.

It would manifest as a polite disinterest when their father was around, and she never took it much further than that when he wasn't, but she refused to interact with him.

Shukaku thought he reminded her of his mother.

Indra was thirteen when Isobu told them in his shy voice that he'd been inspired to explore the peace and quiet of the deep sea. Son Goku- his closest friend amongst the brothers- fought so incredibly hard to keep him with them, but the turtle had always had the most resolute of wills when he set his mind to something.

In the end their father had to separate them, and for all Shukaku's attempts at mediation they were perfectly content to just… ignore one another. Two brothers left, then, instead of one.

Two days later Shukaku found his father sitting beside his wife's grave, folded neatly into a meditative pose as eyes so weary stared

down at the flower-littered patch of earth. They sat together in silence for a long while, quiet- content for a moment to bask in the nature of vibrancy and springtime airs.

“I plan to send them on their journey, soon. In five years, or less.” Lines of stress wore weary tracks around his face, purple eyes eerily dark in the midday sun. “Both Hamura and I spend no insignificant amount of time traveling after we trapped the Juubi, and it will do them both good to experience the world outside of the Ootsutsuki village.” He sighed, pushing his gudodama to the side and gently sprawling out on his back. “The sky is beautiful, isn’t it?”

Shukaku bit back a snort. “Get to the point, old man. You look stressed.”

“I fear, son… I thought, after you told me your tale, that the future you spoke of would be impossible. I tried so… so *hard* . For her-” and they both know who she spoke of. “For my mother’s dream, before she stepped too far and went… very mad.” Talking about Kaguya was perhaps the thing Hagoromo liked the *least* , but here… here he was just quietly exhausted. “If I’ve failed as a father to you nine, then how much more have I to Indra and Asura? I fear my foolishness may have damned us all.”

“No. You’re the best father anyone could have ever asked for-” and he spoke with the resolute conviction of completely believed, the logical reasoning of someone who’d *had* more than one father across the years and worlds. “We’re a handful- I’ll admit that, but you’ve always been able to keep us settled.”

“Six Paths senjutsu does not a good father make, Shukaku. Especially to two little humans…”

“You’re not perfect, but hey- nobody is, right?” After a second’s consideration he laid down beside him, careful not to cause any undue damage to the graveyard. The sky really *was* beautiful- a touch of cerulean blue, a sea of wispy white and the beaming sun hung across the firmament’s tapestry. “Let me rephrase what I said

earlier- you've managed to keep us remarkably well adjusted, despite the distrust from the others. You're charming, peaceful, wise, and resolute. You-"

"Alright, alright! You sound like your uncle- he'd always nag me about my worrying, then go and formulate the most outrageous plans. The moon was his idea, you know?"

Shukaku thought back to what he could remember of his uncle before he'd left- the long nights spent exploring fuuinjutsu, days together with the family, ink-stains all across his father's pristine robes. "Yeah… yeah, I can see that."

"I suppose I fear for nothing… but, I cannot help but imagine how it *could* be. Everything is so similar to what you spoke of…"

"Father, please. I don't think there's any reason to worry- Indra loves his brother, and Asura loves Indra immensely too. Things are different already- there's nothing to fear. So long as you ensure Indra he's still loved, I don't think he'll be all that upset." A little smirk crawled onto his face. "Plus, can you imagine Indra giving your sermons? He'd have a panic attack the first day."

The Sage of Six Paths, the man, Hagoromo wheezed with laughter. " *True* , true indeed." A moment, in peace- "you're a kind soul. I will never regret giving life to you, son- thanks for assuaging and old man's worries."

"Love you too, father…" ah, the sky really was beautiful, as flowers on a breeze fluttered beside him, and the moon hung, just barely visible over the horizon.

"That must be frustrating." Fifteen year old Indra had translated his belligerent introversion into an unfailingly polite, almost unnerving calm mask. Just under six feet tall from acute not being malnourished, the languid grace and cold eyes looking down at his work might have been intimidating were he not a twenty foot tall bijuu

who remembered his attempts at the same indifference as a bumbling six year old.

He- carefully- set his current project down beside him. "What? Using the brush, or trying to figure out how this blasted thing works?" Storage seals, he'd found, were both incredibly versatile and almost *impossible* to get a specific effect from. Drawing one just *slightly* wrong could cause it to store twenty times more, or- much more likely- make it explode.

"Both, I suppose."

"Take my word for it- growing up sucks."

A smile quirked across Indra's otherwise blank face. " *I* , for one, have no plans to grow twenty feet tall."

Shukaku sighed in forlorn exasperation. "If *only* . I'm gonna be almost a mile tall, one day." Then even the massive corridors of the Ootsutsuki compound wouldn’t be able to hold him. No amount of austere woodwork and careful construction could account for his future size.

Indra *gaped* for a moment before cooling his expression back into his polite mask. "Inconvenient doesn't even *begin* to describe that. I hope you get some of your ideas working before then. Either way, I was coming to you in hopes of recruiting your help with my wind release training-"

A blur crashed into Indra, knocking him over- right into Shukaku's inks. "No help me! Izumi and Aki and- they didn't believe me when I said I could control the earth!" Ah. Asura- precocious thing, just as fast as Indra in a race, ten times as clumsy, and incapable of not putting a smile on his face.

Indra scowled at his little brother as he pushed himself off the ground, white robes stained splotchy black. "That's because you

can't use earth. You can barely use some of the most basic ninshu- why do you think you could use earth release techniques?"

"Well…" Asura fiddled with his fingers as he glanced between his brothers, face scarlet in some impressive mix of embarrassment and indignation. "I was like- 'hey dad, can you please tell me what super awesome things I can do?' and dad was like, 'ah, yes son. With my sagely sage ways and super cool eyes, I foresee you can do tree release-' and I was like ‘tree?’ and he was like ‘earth and water’ and then I told Izumi and Aki and they don't believe me and-"

"Alright!” Both of them fell silent at once, Asura sheepishly and Indra… still sheepishly, but cold and collected at the same time. “I can teach you *both* elemental manipulation- just keep in mind that my chakra control’s still sort of terrible. I probably won’t be able to help you with anything really fine.” The two nodded, the actions eerily similar despite the differences between the two boys. “So, tell me where you’re at..”

"I can manifest some amount of wind natured-”

“I was working, and I can get the chakra to go like, *rumble* in my coils, but then I have to make it earth natured and I can’t-” They both stopped talking at once, glaring at each other in the seconds before Shukaku whacked them- lightly- over the head with his tail.

“Talk *politely* , you two- one at a time.” The silence stretched, both of them eying each other with a sort of playful wariness. They *thought* they were being subtle, but Shukaku could practically see the thoughts running through their heads as they waited to interrupt each other. “...Indra. You first.”

“No *fair*- ” a sharp look shut Asura’s whining down, but the sulking in the corner was completely unnecessary and entirely his own prerogative.

Indra glanced to the sulk-corner, clearly trying to hide a snicker. “Right. Well, before my baby brother punted me into your fuuinjutsu

supplies and interrupted my self-assessment, I was saying that I'd managed to both create and expel wind natured chakra, but cannot maintain any significant degree of control over it."

Sensing Indra's time for speech was up, Asura's sulking was promptly forgotten in favor of… exuberant… speech. "And I can't get the chakra to do the earthy thing! I mean, I can get it to *almost* , but there's just… something. I don't know. It's like the chakra *wants* to be earth, but it doesn't want to be earth natured."

Both of them were silent for a bit, allowing him a second to think things over- or maybe to mourn his lost fuuinjutsu supplies? It was hard to know with them. "...Indra, understand that wind release is different from fire or earth release. It doesn't like having a set path, nor appreciate the firm will necessary for earth techniques. It needs to be guided, but not *forced* . Asura, try using your water and earth affinities together, instead of separately."

"...but wouldn't that make it harder?" Asura was the one who'd asked the question, but it was pretty clear Indra was thinking along the same lines even if he was nominally focusing on his own task. "I mean, I like- having to learn wood *and* water release at the same time?"

"Not necessarily. I couldn't use earth or wind release separately until after I gained some mastery over my sand. I suspect you have something pretty similar. Try drawing on your chakra-"

"Okay!" Before Shukaku could stop him he *yanked* on his own internal energies, blasting out a massive shockwave of bluish white energy which had the coincidental duel effects of absolutely ruining any chance of salvaging his fuuinjutsu equipment and blasting the wall off the building. "...uhm-" he looked to a supremely unimpressed Shukaku, and an Indra who'd reached the end of his daily getting-knocked-over -by-Asura patience. "We have a… nice entrance to the courtyard?" Something groaned worryingly in the ceiling above them.

Ah, the puppy eyes. A shame he tried to use them within range of Indra's fun-canceling aura. "You're still in trouble-" and perhaps it was a *little* funny the way Asura immediately deflated, followed by Indra's lazy eye-roll. Grinning, he flicked out with his tail, sweeping the two of them up into his arms and ruffling Asura's hair. Not Indra's- he hated that, but his presence was comfort enough for the older of the two. "Come on, let's go get father. If we're lucky maybe *he'll* give us a lesson on chakra, and then we'll really understand elemental natures…" they slipped off into the dim halls of the compound, gently talking about the many myriad natures of chakra, of life and fun, anything and everything.

For now, it was enough.

Three years later the Sage of Six Paths sent his progeny on a journey, to select from them his heir. His final words to them before they left were a promise- that no matter what, he would always love them. The disciples bowed low at the end of his speech, and the people of the village lined up to watch them leave- even the bijuu who'd yet to distance themselves more completely came to watch from one of the nearby mountains.

Kurama of all people came- not for Indra, for he could care less, but for Hagoromo's sake. Really, all it had taken was a single request- not even delivered in person- for the kitsune to drop everything and come running. Father's boy indeed.

Generally, though, it was a happy affair- which was why he found it eminently odd to come across Kokuo sobbing in a corner of the Ootsutsuki compound after the speech. They'd both grown a fair bit taller, so as much as he was trying to huddle up in the corner he really took up the whole hall.

He stepped up to him, then paused, not quite sure what to say. Instead, he just laid his tail over Kokuo's back, dragging him into a close hug- an iota of comfort. Kokuo sniffed, then returned the embrace with his five tails- which was unfair in how much better his

hugs were. *He* wasn't the one being comforted. "...kaku'? Wha' you doing here?"

"My brother's crying inconsolably. Where *else would* I be?"

"With *Indra* and *Asura* ." A snarl laced its way into his voice- almost frightening in how much raw emotion suffused the air- grief and anger, faint undertones of betrayal- "you know? The *heirs* ."

Shukaku frowned in confusion, carefully winding around the bijuu so as to sit by him, side by side. "What's wrong?"

"I- I worked *so hard* to be heir- and, and *I wasn't even given a chance!* All Indra and Asura did was get *born* , and then they were both- both just *better* . Indra can use all five nature transformation and I can barely even transform my chakra from its elemental nature to an unnatured form- and- and I *still* can't do the chakra transfer ninshu!" His voice had risen steadily as he rambled until it was a bassy shout, sorrowful and immense. Loud-

Shukaku stepped back, trying his very best to adopt the same serious mask he'd used so often as a child when Kokuo would come to him asking so many, ever various questions. "Try not to worry yourself overmuch about it. Bijuu chakra and reserves make *everything* difficult-" Kokuo choked out a strangled laugh between his furious tears, because if that wasn't the truest thing to have ever been said then their father wasn't the sage of six paths. "-and, besides, I'm sure there was a reason-"

"They *hate us!* Father- father doesn't- didn't want ninshu to be about malice and anger, but- but how can I be heir if everyone hates me?"

"They're just afraid-"

" *No!* " The pure vehemence carried within the sudden wave of killing intent, boosted by the nature of the once-Juubi's chakra was stunning in its intensity. Kokuo clearly felt *strongly…* sometimes he forgot how much harder his siblings would take the constant wary

looks, the silent distancing and subtle distaste- he'd had nineteen years of emotional maturity to buffer him against that- his siblings had been *children* . "No- they hate us! How can you stand their- them- their looks, like we're rabid *animals* -" he gasped, voice giving out as he stepped away from Shukaku.

Shukaku softened his face into a gentle frown, wishing he'd mastered his father's gentle cool, or even Asura's exuberant happiness. If only Chomei wasn't molting right then… she'd always been the best of them at cheering them up. "I'm sorry you've had to go through that. The Juubi is a really terrible mom, eh?" His grin was weak-

" *Shut up!* " Ah, not a time for a smile, if he even *could* after that. "You- it's *not the Juubi* - they hate us because they hate us. You tried everything, *everything* - and now we're here, hidden and hated. You shouldn't try- they don't *deserve* you to try! I *hate them!"* He snapped his mouth shut-

Yin and yang. Unconscious, unbalanced, and weak- but a bijuudama, however unfocused, was still enough to blast the entire eastern wing to rubble and burning wood. Eyes wide at the sheer *destruction* he'd caused, Kokuo took a step back- mouthing some unknowable phrase repetitively in mute horror.

Shukaku reached out slowly, but perhaps he couldn't hide the fear- his *disappointment,* for that was far worse to his brother- and Kokuo barely gave the hand a glance before bounding away into the mountains with few powerful strides.

He tensed to leap after him, then stilled as a hand- small yet so impossibly strong- grabbed his leg. "Give him some time." Father… he couldn't help but relax in his grounding presence. "Do you think he'll take it well if you came after him right now?"

"...no," and if it was a grudging allowance, then nobody needed to know. "I just wish I wasn't so *useless* ."

“He’ll calm down and talk to you eventually. He’s your brother- he’ll always love you.” A pause- “you’re not useless, either. You’re prime entertainment for an old man like me!”

Shukaku snorted softly, letting some of the oily-slick tension, that nervous miserability, drain from his body. “Stop pretending to be Hamura, dad. I’m… not in the mood for this right now.” He was silent, for a moment staring at the incredible devastation around him and envisioning the same thing a thousand times over in a city for peace between two brothers who’d never war. “They hurt him. My little brother-” he’d be *so* mad if he’d realized that was how he thought of him. “Those *worthless humans*- ”

He froze.

Worthless *humans* .

As if he wasn’t human-

He wasn’t-

A spectral arm of Susanoo enveloped him completely, powerful blue-white chakra embracing him completely and punting away his existential crisis for another time. For a moment, in the ruins of the Ootsutsuki compound- with his father- he allowed himself to just… relax.

A year passed, Kokuo nowhere in sight, every attempt to reach out through their shared mindscape rebuffed with extreme prejudice. In retrospect, learning to ignore and avoid problems- read: terrified villagers- since an early age probably hadn’t been conducive to perfectly healthy emotional development.

At least he’d escaped those particular maladjustments thanks to his reincarnation, thought Shukaku with no little bit of relief as he avoided the villagers with near-religious fervor.

He’d even managed to avoid that existential crisis! Great times, all around.

As he’d expected, Indra was the first of the two to return- a year later yet still perfectly collected as he strode through the village to the mostly repaired Ootsutsuki compound. By the time he’d escaped to Shukaku’s domain after being greeted by father, the villagers, and everyone who could had enough strength to stand and gawk, exhaustion was written clearly over his face, faint annoyance hidden in the crease of his eyes. “ *How* Asura manages that-” he sank into a meditative pose on a cushion with all the grace he could for what was essentially a flop- “I will never know.”

There was a moment of silence as Shukaku finished the last small line in his slightly adjusted storage seal, stretching uncomfortably long as he placed it off to the side to dry. “It’s… an acquired taste. How did the journey go?”

Indra graced him with a look drier than the sands of the wind country wastes. “Given the amount of ridiculous tasks I had to complete, I’m rather confident the ‘wandering randomly’ part wasn’t quite that random at all. Besides that, though, it went rather well.”

“Hm?” A clump of sand floated over to the seal before forming into a somewhat wobbly blob as he flicked his tail over to the paper and channeled just a *bit* of chakra through- and grinned as the entire mass disappeared with the faint thump of displaced air. “Spill, please. I want to know.”

“It was either a tragedy of good fortune or a comedy of errors, I know not which- several months into my journey I stumble upon a small village in the wastes flourishing with life. Curious, I ask them to show me the source of their wealth- and they lead me to a *seedling of the god tree.* ”

“ *What!* ” The jerk of the brush over his seal and the resulting poof of smoke and fire was suitably dramatic for the moment, he thought.

A soft grin- or, the equivalent for Indra, a small quirk of the lips. “Indeed, my thoughts exactly. Overcome with incredible fear I demanded that they destroy it once, lest they risk the destruction of the world, using my father’s title as proof of sincerity. Unfortunately, they took offense to the perceived threat and attacked with lethal force- I managed to restrain them with a small earth technique after developing-” his eyes bled into the lurid red of the sharingan, perfect cool momentarily disturbed with something both grimace and gleeful joy in equal measure- “and destroyed the seedling with a powerful fire technique. *Thankfully* no ten-tails manifested.”

Shukaku hummed in agreement, watching as his third seal sealed the exact same amount of sand as the first. “That would have been… very bad. Still, that *couldn’t* have taken you a year.”

“Correct. Additional reconnaissance after the destruction of the seedling revealed a general aura of apathy and despair in the settlement, due to a belief that they would perish of starvation without the localized natural chakra overflow of the seedling. I then proceeded to offer the construction of a well in recompense for my actions, and attempted to use an earth technique-”

“-which failed.” Shukaku didn’t even need to look up to see the annoyed glare sent his way-

“-yes. Which failed.” By the time he’d finished his seal Indra’s polite mask was once again emplaced. “I then spent several months meditating on the nature of chakra and control thereof while simultaneously utilizing my… incredibly… limited water techniques to refill the reservoirs. I was actually inspired by your seals for this.” Shukaku paused where he’d about to seal another ball of sand away, looking at Indra with sudden intent- watching in careful awe as he flashed through a set of hand seals, chakra contorting in a myriad of basic patterns.

He’d give a lot for proper tenketsu to use those… that would solve *so many problems* . Well, he had an eternity to get his control up to par. “Very… impressive. Yes. That.”

“You sound unimpressed.”

“I sound *jealous* .”

Indra’s peal of laughter was as unexpected as it was bright- a sonorous roll of some forgotten bell, as beautiful as he’d remembered. “Chakra control issues, again?”

“ *You* try having a bijuu’s reserves one day.”

A solemn nod. “Fair enough. Regardless of that matter-” a neat tilt back, just far enough to avoid his tail- “my hand seals ultimately proved adequate for the task, and I dug a two hundred and fifty foot deep well for the villagers over the course a day. I… these hand seals are going to be more important than even the internal chakra manipulation, I think.”

Shukaku nodded softly, positioning yet another globe of sand above a seal. “A lot of people are gonna be able to use higher-level techniques because of those. Good job.” He could see it- the cities they’d build, the technology- a mechanized world, a soul out of place… wistfully he activated the seal with perhaps a little *too* much chakra, and suffered the flare of light and snap of sound in return.

It wasn’t enough to break Indra’s facade, but he could *swear* those eyes were laughing at him as his bloody sharingan immortalized the memory of him floundering with his sand to put out a fire, and the morose droop of another failed seal.

Three months after Indra’s return he made a breakthrough with his sealwork- the storage seal wasn’t a single character that meant *store* , but instead an incredibly advanced matrix simplified *into* a single character over a thousands of years long game of seal telephone. Well, the equivalent of that in a world where proper rice farming was a revolutionary development, at least.

Either way, when he first, *finally* finished an exploding tag, he felt as if he could cry. Carefully channeling chakra through it, watching the lines light up-

It exploded.

Perfect .

One and a half years after Indra's return- just after Indra's twenty second birthday- Asura returned with a gaggle of awed foreigners behind him, and a resolute- if perhaps a bit intimidated- woman by his side. He wove a tale almost eerily similar to Indra's- a sapling of the god tree, and a well dug, this time through sheer grit and community effort rather than genius techniques.

The two brothers reunited on rather amicable terms, even if they lived more separately- Indra in the compound, and Asura with the villagers. Indra's hand seals even managed to do the impossible- make Asura somewhat, passably, *a little bit* decent with chakra techniques. Well, at the very least he didn't blow things up with unrestrained chakra blasts anymore.

Indra was distant- but that was normal enough, and Shukaku was far too busy basking in the fact his newfound seal barely-competency that actually allowed him to talk with a few brave humans to prod his antisocial little brother into human interaction.

A shame Kanna- Asura's wife- the woman he'd brought back from his journey- seemed to fear him so much. She was such a nice woman otherwise… two years passed with little interaction with Asura- either brother in truth, but that was *fine* . It was, and he'd keep telling him that until it stuck.

He knew Shukaku's story. He had a lot of hope it'd go differently- but still… it was probably a good skill for a monster like him to have.

Two years, one month, and fourteen days after Asura returned to the compound, Ootsutsuki Hagoromo, the Sage of Six Paths, proclaimed his heir to the ways of ninshu and the domain of peace: his son, Ootsutsuki Asura.

Shukaku stumbled- almost literally- across Indra in one of the back hallways to his little warren.. “I… I don’t know what to feel about it.” Scarlet sharingan met his golden eyes, a scowl etched onto a normally placid face. “I *knew* this was coming- my techniques are good, but Asura was always the people person. He makes a good heir. He’s my brother. I still feel…”

“Betrayed?”

“...yeah. How’d you know?” It must be a bit worse than he’d thought, the very personification of pose and composition sounded that worn.

Shukaku wrapped his tail around the boy, tugging him into an embrace. “Feelings can be illogical. Your older brother Son Goku felt betrayed when Isobu left to explore the oceans, even though he didn’t really have the right to decide that for him. Matatabi probably felt betrayed by your mother’s death-”

Indra chuckled softly, voice just a bit raspy. “Oh *shut it* , you tanuki-shaped ball of sand. I’m not a *four year old* - I understand that emotions exist.”

“Really? I always thought your blank-face mask was for when you forgot!”

“ *Tanuki-shaped ball of sand* .” He leaned into the embrace, the tension draining out of his body faint, but noticeable. “My gratitude for putting things in perspective. I’m proud for my brother- and that’s all that matters.” A faint hint of red crept on the tips of his ears- *very* faint, but Shukaku could read Indra like a particularly well written book. “I still find myself compelled to take a small retreat- perhaps back to the village I saved- to distance myself from the excitement,

and perhaps develop a few new techniques. Not that I don't want to be here, but-"

"Sometimes you just want to be alone. I understand. Just remember that we're always here for you." He set him down on the floor, exerting the utmost maximum of his fine control to brush off most of the sand. "Have fun, little brother."

"I won't be gone forever- and I don't plan on going alone. There's two rather dogged followers of mine who I think would appreciate the chance to learn from me, and I'd be able to increase my… people skills." The grimace on his face at the last two words was enough to make Sukaku laugh out loud, clutching his stomach as the low, hysterical rumbles echoed down austere corridors and overgrown gardens. "...I know. You don't have to rub it in." He smiled- a real, true smile like Shukaku hadn't seen from him in an age- "goodbye, Shukaku. I'll be back, one day."

Shukaku watched him stride away through the dark halls, robes fluttering dramatically in a wind release he'd clearly used for purely theatrical reasons, and daydreamed of fantastical futures and petty hopes.

The Sage of Six Paths should have been immortal. There was something incredibly wrong, he thought, standing in a vast underground chamber, nine young bijuu standing in a ring around their dying creator, about his father passing away. The Sage of Six Paths should have lived forever, bringing peace and hope to a mourning world. The Sage of Six Paths shouldn't have been able to die- but Ootsutsuki Hagoromo, the mortal, could die of a simple cold and a bit of chakra exhaustion. If he hadn't sent Hamura that letter with his rinnegan…

A shaft of moonlight lit the chamber in shimmering pearlescent white, gleaming off the cold stone floor. Hagoromo smiled, faintly- a tug of his lips as rinnegan amaranthine met his mother's grave.
"...children." The bijuu shuffled closer, eyes wet with unshed tears.

They'd all come for this last moment- the others had already said their farewells, but here- at the end of legend, they were all that remained. "I'm sorry… that I couldn't do more for you. Know… know that even if they did… I never, could never hate you…"

"You were the best father we could have asked for." Kurama stepped forward, pressing his nose against Hagoromo's side, followed by each of the others as they offered their final words- their final thanks, for the life he'd given them and the love he'd lavished upon them. "I- we- we love you, will always remember you… …goodbye."

" Gamamaru gave me a… prophecy, once. About a gold-haired kid, and blue eyes. But… don't worry about the future." His eyes locked with Shukaku for a long moment, so pained- yet still as bright as he'd ever seen. "Live… well. Enjoy the peace I've made for you my… my children." He coughed, specks of blood staining his once-white robe, chakra visibly flickering as he summoned the strength to fold his hands atop his chest. "Remember… please, remember… I will always love you."

The Sage of Six Paths closed his eyes to the poignant words of a man who'd yet to live, the words Shukaku had used over and over again, and Shukaku wept. For a man who'd meant everything to him, who'd given him hope and truth, comfort and the stability of knowing there had always been someone he could go to, someone who shared his fears and hopes-

As his gudodama faded, black orbs crumbling to dust and so much shining light, he wept for a world without its savior. He wept for a world without his father.

The Sage of Six Paths died as he lived- in peace.

For nine immortals, time moved ever onwards.

Ootsutsuki Indra did not attend the funeral.

This chapter is... long. Yeah that's how I'd describe it. It's been years since I wrote this much in a day.

Indra as a likable character? Wow, how novel, sure do hope nothing had happens to him- which it won't, of course, because nothing bad ever happens to the Ootsutsuki. Yeah.

RIP Hagoromo, best Sage of Six Paths to ever walk the earth. Nagato and Madara had nothing on you.

Brothers' War

Chapter 4: Brothers' War

A soft weight settled lithely atop his head, uncharacteristically still. “I’m here. Shukaku, Shuku, Shuku-” he hadn’t heard that name in ages, as two hands gripped onto his sand with manic strength. “I… I could barely get most of them to safety in time… it’s all destroyed. The compound… the compound worst of all- there’s nothing left there.” Asura’s body shook softly with his sobs. “Who could do this? Who could be such a monster?”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The compound felt remarkably different without his father’s presence- lighter, yet more distant. It wasn’t any one thing- he’d expected most of them, but it still hurt when Kanna would look at him with barely disguised coldness, at the sand he sometimes tracked in with animal disgust. Fuuinjutsu lessons with the villagers slowly dried up, and using a brush had become so unwieldy as to be near impossible.

The hallways were too small for him, now. Only his warren, so carefully hewn from the mountainside, was large enough to fit him comfortably.

He felt like an outsider in a home he’d lived in longer than them. For all his conviction to remain with the humans, as the seasons cycled it faded to but two reasons- Asura’s love, and the expectation of Indra’s return.

Without the Sage, with his other siblings scattered-

Alone.

He was so, so alone.

Screams woke him.

Screams and the roar of fire, shrill echoes of crumbling wood and the painfully powerful hum of directed chakra- *killing intent* - permeating the air. Shukaku woke up with a gasp and a roar, throwing himself out of his warren with the jerky lethargy of sleep disrupted. There was something so terrible, *disgustingly* wrong about the feeling suffusing the air- anguish and sickening rage, pride and sorrow.

It asked him to die, and he laughed in its face as the Juubi's nature spilled out into the air around him, unending rage just as potent. A single, powerful leap threw him up a small hilltop, beyond which he could see- the *village!*

A smoking ruin, burning with black flames that *felt*- ancient, powerful. As if the things they burnt had always *been* burnt, just waiting for their inevitable immolation. Disgust and horror, and *rage* - pooled in the bottom of his chest, and he desperately searched for who'd done this. " *Asura!* " Black flames, black flames- there was something about that, if only he could *remember* . "Where are you-" no, *please*- he begged, but what god was there to beg to? *He* was the Ichibi, the Sage was dead, and in this moment he felt less than useless. "Ausra! Where-"

A soft weight settled lithely atop his head, uncharacteristically still. "I'm here. Shukaku, Shuku, Shuku-" he hadn't heard that name in *ages* , as two hands gripped onto his sand with manic strength. "I… I could barely get most of them to safety in time… it's all *destroyed* . The compound… the compound worst of all- there's *nothing left* there." Asura's body shook softly with his sobs. "Who could do this? Who could be *such a monster?* "

"I don't…" he frowned, watching the black flames flicker and *consume.* There was something familiar about them- they'd been an important attack in the future, he was sure. Itachi's attack-

An Uchiha mangekyou ability.

The pit of horror in his chest bloomed to an ugly suspicion, a terrified dread- he had *changed* things. He had suffered- daily, under the weight of suspicious stares- he'd shown him love, and been loved in return. There was little he'd been more certain of.

A small figure stepped out of the forest across the village, and the bloodlust in the air thickened as they stared out over the burning village. Shaggy locks streaked with ash and *blood* . Fists clenched- the figure's and Shukaku dared not look into his eyes for fear of what he'd see.

Asura was not so lucky. The hitch in his voice, the painful cry- " *Indra!* Why- why are you doing this?" Shukaku winced, rubbing at his ears. Chakra enhanced shouting was *loud* . "What- have you gone *mad?* This isn't peace- this isn't *ninshu* !"

"Ninshu is weak." Cold. It wasn't just a mask, anymore, and something in Shukaku crumbled at the sound of that sneering voice- "the Sage of Six Paths picked the wrong son- I will- I have the strength to guard us against ourselves. Observe the mastery of- of the true heir!" A bewildering chain of hand seals flickered by- "fire release: darkling smoke!" A swirl of smoke billowed out of nowhere, thick and dark, billowing like black flames. A second passed, faint purple light beginning to throb within it-

Perhaps feeling Shukaku's worry, Asura flickered through a few hand seals, summoning an immense gust of wind. "I won't let you do this…" it was barely more than a whisper- for himself, but Shukaku heard it nonetheless.

He wondered if crushing guilt could kill a bijuu.

The last vestiges of smoke dissipated, revealing a hulking figure of purple flames, bound in armor and dark flames-

A roar of chakra, almost as strong as his own, and the figure shifted to something *more.* “Complete body: Susanoo.” It *towered* over them- almost as tall as he’d be in the future. Mountains looked puny against its form. “You are nothing against me, Asura. You are too weak to rule.”

“ *Never* !” Oh. Asura’s killing intent was… like the burning of sun, a dream of children mourning lost parents, a crushing guilt- that to attack him was to attack the sun. Pointless in the extreme. “Wood art: binding of the Shinju!” Cacophonies of shifting wood and breaking earth filled the village as the forests flexed, groaning as the bedrock beneath the village shuddered and broke. Asura shifted to a battle stance, the forests stilling as two beasts faced one another- and then the roots broke the surface, hundred-foot thick immensities which speared out toward Indra’s perfect Susanoo.

“ *Weak* .” A blade chopped down, splitting a root in two like so much tinder. “You’re *foolish* if you believe this will go any way but one- my eyes see your death-” and a blow of Susanoo’s wings sent him flying into the air, swords outreached in deadly grace even.

“ *Move!* ” Shukaku moved, bounding away from the blow that rent a mountain in two and leveled what remained of the village. Indra leapt after them again, swords flashing in a dance of terrible grace as he wrecked devastation across the landscape. “We need to keep free-”

“ *You cannot escape me!* ” There was something… manic, in the depth of his voice- “You… Asura-” and that momentary pause was all he needed, thick bindings of roots enveloping his Susanoo in a deadly embrace. Asura clenched a fist, and the roots *squeezed* - but the perfect Susanoo withstood even that crushing force. A choking sound drifted across the space between them… and it was only after looking into the construct’s flaming eyes that Shukaku realized Indra was *laughing* . “How… how weak.” It felt like a sob. What could have changed him so much? “Your strength is *insufficient* , little brother.”

Shukaku settled his mind, trying desperately not to remember, memories of a cute little ever curious boy floating to the top of his

consciousness. Grief and anger and clinical sorrow prickled at the edge of his mind he set it aside, focusing-

Eight parts yang.

Two parts yin.

Rotating, as if the world spun on his command, dizzyingly dense chakra that seemed to pull the very essence of nature around it in swirling eddies.

Bite down.

Shukaku opened his mouth and blasted Indra with a bijuudama.

It felt like the end of the world- if Susanoo's strikes had the strength to cleave mountains, then this would *disintegrate* them. The air *thrummed* as an incandescent beam of chakra slashed through Asura's wood like so much wet paper, gouging a deep line through the construct's face and forcing the Susanoo to a knee. Purple chakra fought in vain to fight off the binding roots, seconds- mere moments of weakness, yet still enough to pin his Susanoo to the ground.

Wood swept underneath him in a wave, raising him and Asura to eye-level with the Susanoo. "Can…" a shuddering breath, in sorrow or rage he couldn't tell. If they were even so separate to begin with… "can you do that again?"

There was no need to respond- instead he gathered his chakra with furious determination, shunting stray thoughts to the back of his mind. Once, one last time he stared into the kneeling body of his brother trapped within the construct, and sighed. It was never supposed to come to this.

The bijuudama fired-

Yet the beam only sliced through air. There was nothing to hit.

Indra was gone.

Asura sat at the edge of their miserable little camp, eyes puffy too red, many tears etching their long trails down his cheeks. The ground beneath them had been trampled into a sticky mud by the desperate flight of the villagers, and the smattering of tents, hammocks, and just… people… weren't that much cleaner. "Do you know why he did it?"

"No." His voice rumbled quietly through the forest, shocking birds off their perches, catching on the edge of its own sorrow. "I don't know why. I… he wasn't the sort of person to do something like this."

"It was just… such an about face in behavior. He was always cold, but never *cruel* ." A sigh escaped Asura as he leaned into his shifting sand, letting the shaken, woody solidity of his chakra touch against the vastness of an empty desert sky. Somewhere in the distance the sound of gentle sobs intermingled with birdsong and dripping water. Peaceful- but not a different kind of peace than the Sage's. The breath of air after a battle… "How could he have changed so much in just a few years, Shukaku? How can I *get my brother back?* "

In those words, he dreamed of a terrible world, and in that dream remembered a quiet child who'd pestered endlessly for help with his techniques. "I don't know, Asura." The man beside him slouched, slightly, looking as old as his father- a weariness beyond mere physicality. "I don't know, Asura, but we can *try* ."

Two months passed quickly. The traitor didn't return to attack them other than the occasional long-distance jutsu, yet the lines were nevertheless drawn- it felt as if the whole world had been overturned atop itself. Fields burned as they passed, their little grouping of ninshu disciples- *ninjutsu practitioners* - grew after every village.

A crowd, then an army, then… then a world at war. Two months- that was all it took for the first battles to start flaring up between the

brothers' followers- first by strength of mortal arms, then in fire and elemental destruction.

Two months after the betrayal, Kurama spoke to him in the mindscape for the first time in years. The tug came in a muddy pass between rain and earth country- nothing more than a light touch on the edge of his subconscious, an inherent knowledge that one of his siblings was tugging on the bond between them. Carefully tucking his sealing work out of the rain, he let himself be dragged into the depths of their shared mindscape.

"Shukaku." Some faint expression- distaste, or disgust- curled the edge of his lips as he looked across the vast emptiness to meet his eyes.

"Kurama."

"You *idiot!* Damned fool- you're messing with stuff you shouldn't, and it's only going to end poorly for everyone involved."

Shukaku narrowed his eyes, scowl etched deeply across his face. "Stuff? *Stuff* ? Indra destroyed the village- he destroyed the *compound we grew up in* in his insanity. Asura's your brother, and our father's heir. This is *your* family that's fighting too."

A terrible silence stretched between them as Kurama lashed his tails behind him, glower fixed on his face and ears pressed flat against his head. "...Indra and Asura are no brothers of mine." If they could use killing intent in this space made of the Juubi's remnant connection, then Shukaku's would have been cloyingly thick. "My only family was the sage and the siblings he made."

"You'll regret this, in the future." As soon as he said it, he *knew* he'd regret it later- but he was *angry.* So furious at the foolish, shortsighted beings, so much angrier at the humans who'd pushed their family, their greatest protectors apart. "You'll look back, and remember the brothers who'd loved you, and think- if only you'd done more to keep them safe-"

Kurama lunged at him with a furious roar, but he'd already slipped free from the mindscape- back to rain, like so many falling tears iridescently beautiful…

The first major battle took place between Indra's elite and Asura's main force in earth country, an ambush turned to bloody conflict. The battle itself was light and fire, sparkling lightning and pure elemental manipulation, rockslides and explosions. The seals he'd drawn lit the sky with scarlet staccato sounds- as above in light, so the blood slicked off every surface, rivulets of crimson liquid spilling onto the rocks in an unending tithe. Screams… the screams were terrible- worse than the mangled bodies of the fallen.

He cared little for humans, now, beyond those he'd named family… but the screams- in each one he could hear his two younger brothers- his *older sister, father not father, school-children-* memories.

Afterwards, as they mourned the dead and gathered their strength against further attacks, Asura gave a solemn speech from a craggy outcrop above their army. Wreathed by the same flowering trees who'd choked the life from their enemies, blood yet dripping from the end of his staff.

He called them *shinobi*- they who endure- and Shukaku couldn't help but think of a village hidden in the leaves, a brother bound and hope that felt infinitely far out of grasp.

Despite it all, it was a good speech.

"-and then Aki was all like- whoa, these pieces of paper are super awesome, who made them? And I said- Shukaku- and then they were like, who's Shukaku?" He threw up his hands in mock indignation, a scowl dripped down his face- but it was far more like his childhood petulancy than the tearful fury he had on the battlefield. "And I pointed at you-" he was over a hundred feet tall now, so he

tended to stick out a bit on the battlefield. Great for stomping people, but fine fuuinjutsu was all but impossible. “They were like, *what!* The *Ichibi* made those?”

Shukaku grinned softly- it was nice, he thought- to have this little bit of Asura’s innocence remain. “I bet if you told them you were my brother they’d *flip* .”

“I *did* - back when we were kids, and they were just confused. Kept asking how someone could have given birth to something that large.” His scowl faded to a dopey grin, and Shukaku matched it with a tentative smile of his own. Childhood memories… in this morass of death and burning fields, at least he had his memories to draw on. “...yeah, and then one of the tag makers even backed me up! Have you thought up any new designs yet- we need them, to fight against Indra’s ridiculous jutsu.”

It wasn’t much of a secret that Indra’s shinobi were better than theirs. If they were overwhelmed in a battle- illusory clones. Trapped? Body replacement technique with some poor, unfortunate rock. “Unfortunately not. Most of the equipment sized for me was lost, and I use something along the lines of… ten times the amount of ink for the same results. It’s just not practical.”

Asura *looked* at him, eyes more imploring than a lost puppy drowning in tears of adorability. “But the explosive tags are *so cool!* We could like… blow stuff up! With explosions-”

Shukaku pressed a palm onto his head, trying and failing to ignore the random drivel pouring from Asura’s mouth. Sometimes, he made it *really* hard to see the confident warrior, the leader with his rousing speeches and unending determination. Still, they’d met to talk about something important. “...how are the talks going?”

“I’m… I’m not sure.” Eyes darkened as his exuberance recoiled into itself. The subject of Indra tended to do that. “He seems… receptive, but hesitant. The messengers talk about mood swings between excitement and enough distaste directed toward them they can feel

his killing intent.” Mood swings. Not for the first time, Shukaku wondered if Indra had just… hit his head on a rock somewhere. Indra with *mood swings* . The mere thought bewildered and amused hin in equal measure. “I… I was thinking that maybe he wants someone familiar. I-”

“You want to go.” Asura nodded in relief- “ *Absolutely* not. Nope, not a *chance* . You’re the most important person *alive* , little brother. It’d be all too easy for his assassins to just… stick a knife in you. Then you’re dead, if I have to spell that out.” It was hard to articulate how much the idea *terrified* him.

The fire before them crackled, casting its flickering shadows across the faint depression Asura made in his sand, a small embrace. Warm. “You worry too much… it *needs* to be me. Look-” the camp spread out before them, thousands of similar fires speckling the vast plain like so many stars, a city of dirty tents and weary soldiers. Wounded shinobi clustered at the center, cared for as best they could by the noncombatants, an air of weary determination settled over the entire place. “They need this to end, and I don’t think Indra will listen to anyone but his brother.”

“Gamamaru has been pestering you into learning sage arts recently, right? A ceasefire would be a good time to learn.”

“Yes, but- I’m his *brother* .”

Shukaku’s tail rustled softly as it wrapped around Asura, embracing him so lovingly tight. “It’s a good thing that Indra has more than one brother, then, isn’t it?”

They met together on the fringes of lightning country, towering mountains rising solemn behind them, winter-clad heath spread behind them. Sentinel peaks, their barren shadows stretching long and level over their meeting place as the sun set, their cold winds whipping at his sand and setting Indra’s cloak aflutter.

They were alone.

There was *nothing* around them- the area had been a battlefield in the recent past, but beneath the blanket of downy snow the land appeared… empty. Blank- but for the mountains, it could have been a void of white and sky, clouds and ice. “ *Shukaku* .” Some faint emotion laced those words- mocking, perhaps in the arrogant languor Indra carried himself with, or wrath, or madness. “I wondered who’d they send to kill me.”

“I don’t think I could ever bring myself to kill you.”

“Obviously.” He scoffed, eyes narrowing ever so slightly- “You are incapable of killing me, Ichibi. My complete body: Susanoo is beyond even your bijuudama, and I have only improved since we last faced one another.”

“Huh… uh, let me rephrase that.” He sat, and for all he towered over his brother, he still felt the intimidating weight of Indra’s chakra press down on the air around them. If it came to a confrontation, he was reasonably certain he could escape, but… it would be a *very* destructive battle. “I’m not here to kill you.”

“Really?” He murmured something too quiet to catch, scuffing his feet on the snow for a second before relaxing back into his languid arrogance. “I’ve heard reports of your mastery over sand. Tidal waves as tall as mountains, crushing tombs for thousands of shinobi at once.” A flicker- a cruel smile- across his face. “You make a very good monster.”

“The seal tags are my work too.”

A soft chuckle escaped Indra. “You… you always said you’d be amazing at fuuinjutsu, and…” he started to pace, snow crunching softly beneath his weight- “You… father- father always liked you the best. I saw it- you said you loved me-” he sounded so forlorn- in that moment, Shukaku knew he was insane. No matter how hard he’d tried-

“What happened?” He hated how *exhausted* he sounded in that moment. “What happened on your journey?.” He just wanted to know where he’d gone wrong, for history to follow the course of fate…

Standing on a bed of freshly trampled snow, robes snapping in a fierce wind, he looked every part the tyrant he’d set out to become. “I was enlightened to my own worth. The depth of my father's treachery… my… I-” a sleeved hand reached up to clutch at his head, pained grimace written clearly across his features. The moment his fingers brushed the side of his head, he slouched in obvious relief. “I- it was *stolen* . Mine, mine *mine mine*- stolen, yes. Yes it was- no, my brother, my brother… it was stolen from me.” He craned his neck to see, eye to eye, for a moment looking so lost and hurt, the expression on his face something that wouldn’t have been out of place when he was four. “You… you saw me. You saw father’s… and you still sided with *Asura*- ” the name was spat like a curse- “you… you betrayed me, Shukaku.”

Shukaku just mutely bowed his head, catching a last glimpse of his brother. There would be no reasoning with whatever had turned him into *this*-

“Wait!” The hopeful, slightly broken- *desperate* tone of the voice froze him in his tracks, and he looked back to Indra. He looked… pale- no. Afraid. Determined. Tears clutched at the edge of his eyes- “this… I’m sorry, but this is what you deserve, *traitor* -” tears of *blood* - “ *mangyekou sharingan!* ” A darkness, pearly grin far, far too wide as those eyes, enrapturing eyes pulled him in with grace so terrible.

He called the shadow Zetsu-

And all he could see-

Were spinning-

Pinwheels-

Of-

Red.

This chapter was going to cover the whole conflict between the two, but... well, how could a poor author like me refuse such a perfect chance to make you all suffer?

Zetsu: have you ever thought about about making Bad Life Decisions (TM)? Your father totally betrayed you by the way, and you (wink) defiantly deserve being heir. I'm also not suspicious. Yes/no?

Indra: Ok lets go.

World of Ash

Chapter 5: World of Ash

When Shukaku woke to the biting winds of a wind country sandstorm, he remembered all he'd lost, and could not weep. His family was dead, and he had run out of tears.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Worlds of red. Tomoe, whirring in endless revolutions, time falling inwards on itself as it bowed to the king of gods. Gods, gods… there were no gods- only omnidirectional kaleidoscope of pinwheels and scarlet pulling at his mind, *tearing-*

So much pain.

Blood? Was it his?

No… he did not bleed, not anymore, not since his name had changed from- to Shukaku. Ichibi. Monster. *Monster* .

Worlds of red.

Tomoe.

Spinning.

Pain .

Revolutions, repeating, actions again and again as he slowly clawed at consciousness, never able to catch more than a glimpse of his surroundings- and what terrible glimpses they were. The control technique was incredibly refined- par for the course of one of *Zetsu's* students, he supposed in his delirious humor.

Sadistic… oh, it was such a sadistic technique. If only he could cry within this hellscape of spinning eyes, he would weep. When Indra would sleep he could feel the touch of mania as the illusion frayed, terrible memories bleeding through in mangekyo perfect recall- always, *always* wrapping around to a single flickering flash of two men with lightning-clad fists through their chest.

He thought their eyes the most haunting of it all- so impossibly wide with betrayal, so massive from Indra's all too human perspective. It made them feel… *real* . Then that final memory would burn away on a tide of red, and he'd see a thousand flashes of a sword carving, blood- arterial offerings painting patterns in abstract across a thousand scorched battlefields.

Waking was the worst of it. Everyday without fail they'd trudge through battlefield after battlefield, insidious hooks drawing him forth, single purpose focus for *destruction* layered atop him in choking sheets until only mindless animal intelligence remained.

He hadn't realized how *human* he'd been behaving until it was stripped away from him- jagged slides, slashing, tearing, *biting* and *shredding* with the texture of blood and flesh on his tongue… The control would always loosen *just* after he committed whatever crime Indra's mangekyou prodded him into- for the sake of practicality, letting Indra recover while he was too exhausted to do more than stare- or just to be *cruel.*

The moments after a bijuudama, while the air still hummed with released power, watching ash and fire rain down from an enemy encampment, a village, caravan, refugee, parents, *families* , *children*- the children, he saw the children… He wished he could be something more than a curse

All his vaunted knowledge, and he'd forgotten the one thing truly important. He hated himself for thinking- if only his father could see him, save him, bind Zetsu like he'd bound Kaguya… for wishing he was anywhere else but here.

His family was here-

Family had failed him though, hadn't it? *He'd* failed them.

A fool, a fool, and the damnable genjutsu latched onto those self-deprecating thoughts, repeating it over and over again in whispers at the edge of sanity.

The years passed quickly, but to him… it felt like an eternity.

He understood Sasuke a little better now, he thought in those half-hysterical moments of almost-lucidity. If this was what it means to truly hate- to wish his brother dead with every fiber of his form, to love him so deeply and want to see *him bleed* .

He only wished…

Powerless, he could only wish.

Indra and Asura fought often, each clash more and more titanic than the last. Ironically, as much as Shukaku augmented Indra's sheer destructive power, he also held him back from securing a decisive victory over Asura. He was too much of a liability in a battle between the two- and the strain of maintaining his control over a long distance held Indra back from simply overwhelming his brother.

The first time he witnessed a fight between Asura and Indra, a massive trench was carved into the ground by his Susanoo, lit aflame with Amaterasu, and overgrown with immense jungle in the span of thirty minutes.

The second time, Indra nearly killed Asura with the overwhelming use of Hinokagutsuchi, a massive wave of Amaterasu's flame that burnt an immense gash into earth country. The third time they met, the same strategy failed against Asura's amenomihashira, his life only just saved by a quick lightning jutsu that smashed the spinning sphere aside.

Despite the control, Shukaku smiled bitterly. He could almost see Naruto and Sasuke imposed in double over the two, rasengan and chidori instead of thunder that cracked the earth and a… well, Asura's attack was really just rasengan with five more rasengan stuffed inside of it. Rasengan but better.

One day, they would be more powerful than this, and their enemies even *more* powerful than that.

As the mountains crumbled around him and the sky bled orange-black beneath the flames of burning forests and melting rock, Shukaku pondered fate, inevitability, and weakness. The genjutsu laughed at him as it tugged him back under those layers of comforting, disgusting animal rage, whispering- a fool. A fool.

The years grew long beneath the weight of those terrible, terrible eyes. Battles were meaningless- as blood, all but the waters of life and death slicking off his sand and dripping, in forlorn trails to the ground below. Most combat was solved rather one-sidedly- the faint hum of building chakra, felt beneath even beneath those awful *bindings* , a beam of light and a flicker of whatever he'd destroyed seared across his sight in eternal memory.

In the first few years, he committed those smoking ruins to memory- for the one who would never die, and thus could never forget their tradgedy. Later, he just couldn't bring himself to care. Humans were, after all, *merely human* .

A second flash of memory was added to the nightime nightmares, a woman with inky black hair and haunted eyes, flashes of manic love and terror. Sometimes, when he strained against the compulsions, he felt the acrid bitter pull of disappointment that Indra could love someone else and not *him* . They'd been family…

Some time later, a year at least, or an eternity, the dreams changed again, a black-haired infant cradled in her arms.

Later, another, and a toddler about their feet- and for all he hated, he still let the faint edge of happiness brush across him at the sight of their tiny faces.

Third, another child, and an eight year-old with bloody red eyes, swirling and swirling in maddening circles. Cold, viscous mask affixed perfectly to his face, weapons clenched tightly.

A red and white fan, scarlet on the scarlet of blood- emblazoned where there had once been nine black tomoe. The Uchiha were born to a wounded world.

Last, the woman again in stark relief, silhouetted against the crash of lightning on a stormy sky- a sword through her chest.

When Asura's battles with Indra changed from ideological debate to brutal malice- when Asura stopped trying to get Indra to change his mind and Indra only ever escalated, Shukaku knew they weren't going to save him.

So he started working to save himself.

The first thing he did was take stock of the situation- the compulsion was *tight* . Multilayered, almost to the point of making him thoughtless. It was a mangekyou ability, though, so it was kept as weak as possible at all times in order to reduce stress on the eyes. He shivered at the thought of where he'd be if he *didn't* know all about the dojutsu beforehand through the nature of his incarnation…

Resisting directly was futile- the genjutsu puppeteered him quite effectively indeed. His mental resistance wasn't quite strong enough to stand up to the *mangekyou sharingan* , even at its weakest, so that left hiding a few actions during those moments of near-autonomy.

A routine attack against Asura's encampments allowed him to test his primary theory, struggling to shift the smallest iota of his sand as he charged a bijuudama. As the shockwave blasted back the clouds and shattered the earth, he felt his sand move an inch to the right.

As he'd suspected- he was still able to use chakra- the genjutsu wasn't strong enough to let him throw bijuudama at their enemies without also allowing him to use it elsewhere.

Mental chains reached out to drag him back to unthinking wrath, yet still the faintest exhilaration remained-

It was a start.

Moving sand was easy. Moving it finely enough to manage something that could disrupt Indra's control was hard indeed. By the time an opportunity presented itself Indra dreamed only of lightning, and a world of ash.

Apocalyptic.

Shukaku came to awareness in fits as the battle progressed, the crash of rain sleeting off his sand- flickering lightning cascading against him and illuminating the night. A bijuudama that smashed into the side of an immense boar, exploding it into a gout of blood of viscera. The keening death-cry of a serpent, pocketed with broken scales and pitted craters oozing blood, flickering purple swords skewered through its side.

The rumble of explosions- screams, shouting and the clamor of metal on metal as the earth ruptured beneath them-

A sea of blood, blood red eyes swirling in his vision, pulling him under-

Wading through a tide of brutal combat, chakra enhancement refined until each clash of kunai on steel looked elegant, a jagged, twirling insanity swept away by the rush of his tail. Swept away against the naked *fear* directed towards him, the terrified glares of sorrowful wrath directed his way as shinobi fled beneath his claws, directed against the blood dripping from the chinks in his tail so scarlet red.

Pinwheels spun, patterns tracing beneath his skin-

Mindless, blank rage.

A massive lizard crashed into him from the side, throwing him to the ground- a moment of clarity, then he was building a bijuudama and caving the beast's ribs in with a brutal strike of his tail. Hooks- those mental…

The bijuudama splattered its brains against the ground to be washed away with the rest of the blood and gore- beneath the pounding rain, the tears of heaven. Strobing lights illuminated the silhouettes of mountains for a single moment- if only for the soldiers to watch them crumble.

For Shukaku to see the futility of his strength. How far from the *truly* powerful he stood.

Just as he stormed a particularly annoying pair of humans who'd been using some sort of chain-puppeteering jutsu in a- feeble- attempt to bind him, the genjutsu set upon his mind with a *vengeance.* A rumbled groan of pain escaped him as *thought-*

Held.

He held- against-

A pair of feet settled neatly atop his head, calm- purple chakra exploding out of their form as Shukaku felt his mind *burn,* a sea of blood dripping down from those eternally whirling mangekyou

sharingan. Skeletal limbs burst out of nothing to mirror his own, flesh growing atop it, armor in pieces and binding force-

Wings burst from the purple construct and were subsumed in an instant, everything tightening around until it felt… whole, stable. Armored in Indra's complete body: Susanoo, he felt more in control of himself than he had in years.

Indra commanded something in the subtle language of his control, and Shukaku leapt into the air with enough force to blast a crater beneath him. For a brief moment he could see the entire scope of the battlefield. Uncountable pinpricks of light mixed with the continuous roar of thunder and explosions, vast shadows like beasts winding their way against one another in brutal combat.

As he plummeted toward a ring of blank emptiness in the center of the immense conflict, the only thing he could think of was that- so high above them- he couldn't *hear* them.

"Indra! How *dare you!* " A fiery *fury* was present in Asura's that hadn't been there before, energetic excitement shattered and remade into this… this perverse, broken shadow. "Was killing Kanna not enough for you? Do you have to see everything I loved destroyed?"

"No." Indra sounded… older. " *You* destroy everything you love-" what *absolute bullshit* , but Shukaku could only stare as Asura internalized it, reflecting the blame inwards on himself. "It never had to be this way, but you were too greedy, aspiring beyond your station. In doing so, *you* have condemned all of yourself to death." Shukaku wished he could laugh, laugh and cry against the bitterness wrapped up in his chest. He and Asura were a lot alike at that moment. They both blamed themselves.

"You won't… won't get *away with this!* "

Though he stood atop his head, he could almost see the cold, disinterested glare Indra leveled at Asura. "You mistake the Ichibi's presence for some simple act of *emotion* . No… together, we are

unstoppable. ” Tears cut lines in the ash on Asura’s cheek as he breathed deeply, slowly standing from his meditative pose.

When he opened his eyes, they were brilliant gold. “Sage art wood release: true several thousand hands!” A sea of vines burst from the scorched ground around them, twining together in an instant’s intricate dance of incredibly fine control as a truly monumental statue constructed itself from wood before them. “Wood release: World of Blossoms!”

“Amaterasu!” Black flames danced across the sea of trees, washing against the immense wooden construct uselessly as the valley burnt down around them. Indra, however, didn’t need something so banal as *words* to command Shukaku, and a bijuudama flashed through the air in the same moment, shattering the entire right half of the construct.

Then there were hands.

The technique’s name, uninspired as it might be, was incredibly accurate. *Everything was hands* . The hands were hands, the air was hands, in every direction there were *hands* . They pounded into him in an unending rain of blows that tore at his Susanoo, landing against him no matter how deftly Indra smashed them aside with his blades.

Sukaku had to admit, it was a very Asura sort of technique. Can’t hit a blademaster who always dodges? Just throw enough attacks that they start getting through.

Still hurt, though. A roar bubbled out of his throat as the blows pummeled him, and in return he lashed out with his tail, smashing a hundred hands in a single blow. A spear of lightning shot out somewhere over his shoulder with the sound of a thousand stereos dying in anguished pain- a bolt of light and afterimages sheared off to the side of Asura’s amenomihashira.

Sand swept up from the pulverized earth just in time to block the five inner spheres from blasting him backwards-

Sand.

He could *move his sand again* .

Even as Indra leapt into the sky with blinding flare of Sunsanoo's fire, Shukaku's attention was solely on the genjutsu's loosening bonds. A desperate scrabble- just a little more, against his chakra, against all the sharingan in his mind that cried endless waterfalls of blood.

Sand rose shakily around them, sickly and dominating in Susanoo's unnatural shadows- seething, twisting inwards on itself in grotesque patterns until a perfect shell of dust hung around himself and Indra.

A complete shield.

Wood splintered, cracking beneath Indra's scything blows, wood human technique falling apart-

Something screamed against his mind, but he *refused* it- he'd come too far to fail now. The sands twisted in eerie synchronicity- once more, terrible patterns falling into a single alignment repeated uncountable times across its surface.

An explosive seal.

The world drowned, subsumed in sound and flames. For a single eternal moment a sun shone at night, scattered incandescence reflected in every raindrop like so many glittering stars, vaporizing against the scintillating *heat* of roiling chakra transformed to fire in the breadth of a moment.

Susanoo cracked, and was swept away on that sudden immolation.

Wood cracked and smoldered.

Sharingan control broke.

A clawed hand grasped the edge of a crater as Shukaku pulled himself out to the sight of Indra and Asura opposite each other, chakra seething beneath their skin. Indra glanced at him-

Shukaku didn't spare time for thought. Didn't let sudden absence of those beguiling whispers and screaming barbs phase him, *refused* to allow those myriad memories stay his hand as the sands wrapped tightly around Indra. "Sand Coffin." His voice was a bijuu's deep rumble, and he couldn't help but marvel at how inhuman it was. He didn't let the absolute surety of how much this would hurt, hurt *Asura* , stop him. Denial was a worthless waste of time when held his brother's life in his hands. He clenched a fist. " *Sand burial.* "

His brother's body contorted into shattered shapes and- blood-

So died Ootsutsuki Indra as he lived, in betrayal.

The battleground was quiet, now, as Asura looked at him with such an awfully *broken* expression. "Why? *Why?* You were his brother!"

"I still am." He couldn't quite parse the exhaustion he felt, but perhaps Asura saw it as he glanced away, rage trembling in clenched fists. "This… it went on too long. It could only end in death."

"Then you know what happens next." Cold. Shukaku stared up in drowsy shock roots speared up from the ground, writhing around his form. It had been too long, far too long if Asura could manage a cold voice. "I love you, Shukaku, but… but this war erodes even fond memories, you know? With father, and me pestering you, and Indra always being like 'ah, so cool-'" His voice choked- "the bijuu are weapons, and you are one too bloody. Forgive me in another life, brother." Something seemed to flicker in the darkness around them-

Why, he asked with his eyes, and received no answer. Why did he live, if just to be some cosmic joke to the whims of a too wide smile? "...please. Asura. *Please.* "

“Shukaku- Shuku-” his chakra flared, roots constricting- “I…” he sighed, dropping his hands to his side as the roots relaxed ever so slightly. “You’re always right, you know? I mean, other than that one time you got yourself brainwashed for thirty years-” the gentle smile on his brother’s face was brighter than the sun, and Shukaku couldn’t help but grin in return. “This is like- like when you’d scold me for trying to jump across the stream when the bridge was like *right there* … forgive me. I don’t know what came over me there.”

A rough reached up to rest gently against the wood, and- a moment’s eternity stretched wide as a shadowy, inky blackness reached out in parallel.

Wood crushed him as sand crushed Indra, and Shukaku couldn’t spare a thought for just how *ironic* it all was before his world was *pain* - agony, and darkness.

Within a dream of eternities, existance’s breadth against the depth of all things, a boy twice over drifted. Asleep on a bed of flowers, and stars- as ever the celestial bodies moved in perfect synchronicity, a syzygy of two who waited- a wizened hand laid on the essense of sand and wind in its not quite death. Stay strong, it said. Not your fault, it spoke in amaranthine order, whispering- I love you. And the monster’s relaxed in its death, even as it was rebuilt, part by part in the natural order of things.

When Shukaku woke to the biting winds of a wind country sandstorm, he remembered all he’d lost, and could not weep.

His family was dead, and he had run out of tears.

At least he can make sand seals now?

I swear there'll be comfort somewhere in the story. We still have a bit to go through before we get there, though.

Mangekyou sharigan also known as: wow this character sure does need a convenient immense power increase, hope they don't mind a bit of trauma.

Lonely Path

Chapter 6: Lonely Path

Kokuo raised a hoof as if to sunder the plain beneath them, then paused, gently lowering it to the ground with an aggrieved sigh. “They don’t just fear us anymore. They hate us.”

This chapter's a bit shorter- the next few will be the same, and then we should be back into the action.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Wind country was beautiful in a way he hadn’t truly appreciated until he woke there. In his past incarnation he’d loved the forest- how its trees would tower above his head, the little streams and dew-soaked leaves, gentle breezes framing dappled sunlight.

As a bijuu, though, much of that experience was lost to him. Not that he didn’t still *like* forests and gentle hills- he’d grown up in the forests of fire country with the Sage and his siblings, and he’d loved every acre of its dense wood, but the forest was… fragile to him. Nearly grown to his full size as he was, a single step of his would crush swathes of forest beneath him, rendering a few of his favorite activities outside of the bounds of possibility.

He missed his forests, but the vast openness of wind country, its sweeping deserts and jagged rocks that jutted from the swirling sands… The way the sun beamed down in harsh brilliance, glinting of polished outcroppings, monoliths of time… it was as beautiful as it was austere.

It was in the way he could feel the sand shift beneath him in its infinite permutations, geometric iterations interlocking and sliding past- the way he could feel the winds as they swept through the atmosphere around them, screeching through the rocks and playfully brushing off his back. He could see why the original Shukaku had liked the desert so much.

That, and there weren't many people who lived there. That was a definite bonus for a monster with the sort of notoriety he had. Even in the scant months since he'd woken up, the few groups he'd seen on the horizon had fled as fast as they could until they'd disappeared over the horizon.

Understandable, he mused softly as the night stole over him and he shifted into the sand's comforting embrace. Not a lot of people wanted to be around him after his mangekyou induced rampage. His siblings had been resolutely ignoring every request he'd made over the shared medscape… Asura, maybe, but the last time he'd seen him was with his wood release crushing him to death. Not a pleasant memory. Still, with his siblings mute he was probably the only one who'd talk to him. Hopefully he'd manage to fend the rest of Zetsu's advances off. Hopefully it was Zetsu in the first place. He couldn't quite shake the denial that it wasn't-

In the end, they all betrayed him.

Far too weary for a mere construct of chakra, Shukaku set off to fire country with the barest hints of hope yet flickering.

Asura was dead.

It was obvious in how the forest was cold and quiet like it hadn't been in ages- in how natural growth had begun to overtake the immense roots and impossibly massive trees that dotted the landscape. It was obvious in the absence of that impossibly bright, massive reservoir of chakra- in the void left in its passing, invisible until it was *gone* .

He had already felt it, and that alone was why he hadn't squashed the kunoichi he'd trapped like a particularly nasty bug at the revelation. "Who did it?"

"I- I don't know- nobody's really sure. Ichibi-sama! Please-" the sand coffin shifted softly- a warning- and she snapped her jaw shut to a sharp silence.

He shifted the sand again, and commanded in his rumbling voice- "*speak* . Choose your words carefully." He was just so *done* with this- terror, irrational fear… he'd stuck with humanity until the end, and here he was, most feared of the nine.

"...uhm. Our clan, the Nakamura- we're mostly protection shinobi for the villagers, so we don't know much." She wilted beneath the sudden sliver of killing intent he'd leaked out- another thing he'd have to train back under control. "We- we know some stuff though! Uh- the villages need protection because of the clans that are still fighting, and most of those are still vassals under the Senju and Uchiha- and the word is that the Uchiha killed the Senju patron god?"

Shukaku's mind got stuck on *Senju patron god* for a long second, torn between laughter and… well, laughter. Asura would have *hated* that. "Sand Burial." The shearing sound of stone on shifting earth, shuddered to a halt with the sickening crunch of bones and flesh, scarlet painting the clearing in luridly vivid red.

Sighing, he spared one last glance for the woods of fire country behind him… there was nothing left for him here. No family- none that hadn't betrayed him in the end, at least. If he hadn't been a human himself at one point in time, he might have been inclined to simply *raze it all down* , subsume it in the helpless wrath of the Juubi's chakra… but as there was nothing here for him, there was also nothing of worth to destroy.

Once, he might have stepped in to try and desperately stop them, make them just sit down and see *peace…*

There was nothing for him here.

Turning away, he began his loping run back to wind country, melancholy memories of a future not yet passed drifting through his mind as he envisioned so many generations of conflict, Senju and Uchiha against another until there was nothing left to remember but a shadow and an empty compound.

He couldn't bring himself to care.

His siblings… *really* didn't like him. Not unexpected, but disheartening nonetheless. Really, he should have expected it- if they didn't want to speak over their shared mindscape, then of course they wouldn't want to talk in person, either.

Still, if only to make sure they knew about Zetsu, he'd tried- and if he'd been getting lonely, then nobody had to know.

Matatabi had tried to light him on fire, and done a pretty good job about it.

Kurama had just tried to kill him. He barely managed to escape with his tail intact- blasting down the forest around him with a thousand hastily assembled sand seals to the sound of his own panicked laughter and the kitsune's roaring curses. Needless to say, that was one particular part of fire country he wouldn't be going to in a while.

Son Goku had tried, and succeeded, in beating him up.

Chomei just looked at him- *silently* - disappointment evident in every hard line on her carapace before she flew away.

Saiken spat acid at him, then brought a cave down on top of his head. That *hurt,* and left him sleeping for months to recuperate the chakra he'd used to escape.

Gyuuki *sang* at him. A particularly annoying, *catchy* song about how much he wasn't listening to him at *all* .

No matter how hard he searched, he couldn't find the slightest hint of Isobu's presence, and that left the last of them- the sibling *he'd* hoped to avoid.

Kokuo. The one who'd felt the most like *family* of them all… the one he'd betrayed by standing by the *humans* after the death of the sage. Sighing in soft resignation he pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind, pushing on with his careful gait toward the faint smudge of towering white over the rolling plains on the border between grass and earth country.

Steam's soft scent reached him before he reached where his brother stood so resolute. "Shukaku."

"...Kokuo."

The half-horse turned away, lowering his head as though *he* of all creatures needed to ruminate on the nature of grass. "I don't want to talk to you."

"It's important-"

"Go. *Away* ."

Shukaku was silent for a long moment, watching the wind ruffle the grass below them and the cloudless sky above. "...look, brother, it *is* important. I'm sorry-"

Kokuo *snapped* to face him, jaw clenched tightly for a moment as killing intent boiled the air around them. "Do. you. *Know* ? Do you know what you've done to us with your sheer, bullheaded *idiocy?* Even *Kurama* is more reasonable than you?"

"I-"

“ *Shut up!* ” In that moment, he was eerily reminiscent of the *last* time they’d talked, just before he’d blown… he pushed aside the memories, focusing on the far deeper undertones lacing his brother’s voice, on the wind that brushed through his creamy fur, on his tails- anything but memories past. “We were living *peacefully* , and then you- you just had to go and get captured in Indra’s genjutsu and thrown at anything and everything like a dull kunai.” Kokuo raised a hoof as if to sunder the plain beneath them, then paused, gently lowering it to the ground with a sigh. “They don’t just fear us anymore. They *hate* us.”

“Oh.” He understood, now- if just a little bit- his siblings reactions. “I… I was being controlled?”

Kokuo rolled his eyes. “We *know* . We could hear your screams *all the time* . Even what little we could see from the shared mindscape looked *nasty* .”

“There’s the Kokuo I know. Wry little brother-”

Kokuo huffed in indignation. “ *You’re* the little brother! You’re younger than I-” he froze, face slowly hardening back into disgust and sorrow- sorrow so fathomless. “I don’t… really, really don’t want to speak with you right now.”

“Please-”

His muzzle twisted into a scowl. “ *Leave* , Shukaku. Don’t come back here again-” and, ignoring the bitter feeling seething in the bottom of his chest, he turned around and left Kokuo on the empty plains, alone with the endless winds and memories of anguish.

Shukaku curled up on a bed of sand as the hot sun traced shadows of his figure, monolithing darkness, transient in the cyclical arc of the celestial spheres. The heat created a sort of wavering mirage, a faint shimmer on austere sand that so subtly warped the perception of

there and not- water where there was none, a point of fragile tension on a land of wind and rock.

His siblings refused to listen to him, which- that was ostensibly sensible when it came to his advice on that particular pest known as *humanity* , given how thoroughly he'd been betrayed by them. Asking humans for help was… something he'd prefer not to do. The best he'd get would be coerced cooperation, and at worst Zetsu would *know* he was looking for him, and all his knowledge would become obsolete in the blink of an eye-

Future knowledge.

He blinked, running through the information in his head for a second- making sure to remember Zetsu, because he would never again underestimate that *worm's* subtle touch- trying to remember what had happened after Indra and Asura's… spat.

It had been father's fight with grandmother, his brothers' war, then… Hashirama's childhood- and the vague notion that so much time had passed that the two clans didn't even remember *why* they were fighting anymore.

Groaning in daunted frustration, Shukaku lashed his tail into the dunes, watching the colossal plume of shattered stone and falling sand drift through the air as the sound of his pained chuckles ground together so deep. He could do this… bijuu were supposed to be like… animate typhoons for the most part, natural disasters of immeasurable power who just… did more or less nothing? He wasn't entirely sure, but hundreds of years of that felt…

It sure was something. He turned on his side, a flex of chakra pulling the dunes up to cover him like a particularly comfy blanket- as much as he was loath to wait so long for the interesting stuff to happen, if he had to do so, he'd rather do it well rested.

What da zetsu doin? Who knows???

Shukaku: "Hey Gyuki how's it-"

Gyuki: "La la la la, can't hear you, la la la-"

Shukaku: ._.

Also, poor Shukaku finally confronts being an immortal bijuu with the tried and true method of ignoring it for later.

Trickster's Legend

Chapter 7: Trickster's Legend

Couldn’t he have remained in that- something- before he’d been reincarnated into this immortal shell? Could he have not lived amongst the peaceful humans of earth, the father and sister and three friends who weren’t monsters like the rest?

He wanted to sleep.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

As the stars above ever whirled in maddening patterns, shifting so slowly as the years crawled past- as the sun rose and set in predictable ways, chased ever by the hungering- moon, its eye plucked and buried in nine parts; he lived. The dunes endlessly chased themselves with the dance of the wind, rocky outcroppings rising and falling beneath a sea of golden sand.

As humanity recovered from so many years of tragedy- as the world was forged anew in the homeostatic balance, Shukaku set himself to work, tearing into the roots of the world in the desolate wastes of central wind where the sun was too hot to be hospitable and jagged rocks made passage on foot all but impossible.

First, an entrance. The same rocks that made it so difficult to reach would make tracing him far too easy if he crushed them underfoot, so they’d have to be thinned out. A labyrinth, instead of an impassable wall- easy enough to pass through, too dangerous without desperate motive, its true prize hidden where they simply wouldn’t look. He called upon the strength of his wind and rent valleys through the stone, shattered rock mixing with the settling sand in jagged pieces.

For deterrence… he might yet barely understand the workings of fuuinjutsu, but scouring explosive tags onto those jagged shards buried beneath the sand was child's play. Figuring out a way to turn them from seals to landmines was… a lot more difficult, but eventually he came up with a simple solution- make the ignition sensitive enough to detect the chakra used in sand-walking.

He'd light his own tags as he passed, but it was nothing a twist of chakra couldn't reinscribe into the stone. Hopefully, anyone who'd entered would simply leave on the other side, directed away from the few true paths by the bewildering maze, but the seals should make the entire area thoroughly unappealing. Well, his biggest hope was that *he* didn't get lost in his own maze. That would be *embarrassing.*

Second, a domain. Something defensible, almost impossible to access for a human, but immense enough to comfortably house a bijuu. Surprising absolutely no one, least of all himself, building something on that sort of scale was anything *but* subtle- the best he managed was an immense aperture sliced into the earth. A crack in the bedrock to some vast warren of darkness, a world of sand and labyrinthine danger.

Lastly, most importantly- fuuinjutsu.

Seals stitched themselves together and apart again under Shukaku's watchful gaze, sand in twisted lines and innumerable characters as he pierced together a thousand iterations on a single seal. A faint impression of chakra, reincarnated innumerable times as he picked at a seal he'd long since committed to memory.

Hagoromo's storage seal was, as he'd earlier suspected, the simplified version of a complex sealing matrix, but what he hadn't truly appreciated was just *how* complex it was. The amount of esoteric rules and deft interconnections necessary to hold it together must have been incredible- made all the more frustrating because he didn't *know* any of them.

The sand beneath him shifted again to a different iteration, slowly pulling at one of the exterior almost-icons he'd- tentatively- associated with the chakra consumption of the seal. Dislodged even slightly from its position, the seal's chakra consumption increased exponentially; removed entirely and the seal could barely store a single grain of sand.

Frustrating.

Two months passed with little incident until- *finally* - some of his observations yielded fruit. The almost-icon had been a cyclical damping matrix. *Why* that was important, he didn't know, but it was another piece in the puzzle that was fuuinjutsu. Nevertheless, progress was progress, and the matrix *would* be useful- it smoothed chakra frequency, preventing spikes from burning out more delicate parts of a script.

It wasn't enough.

Ready… he needed to be ready. Zetsu could *not* be allowed to complete his plans.

A new seal shifted into formation out of the thin sand at the bottom of his den, damping matrix connected to the fire-symbol he'd used in the explosive tags, harsh lines standing out so brilliantly as his they glowed bluish orange in the cavernous, pernatural dim.

The first five hundred odd times he activated it, it exploded in a gout of orange-white flames.

After that, it gouted flames-

Twelve days later, a faint seal glowed cheery orange beneath a flickering flame bound- a candle in the dark, catching on his eyes and looming sand.

Progress. Not enough, but it was progress.

Pale blue light flickered fiercely across the empty desert sands, almost lightning-blue in its intensity as chakra swirled inwards in spiraling patterns, a thousand streamers fitting together in perfect synchronicity, *almost* … Two rotations met each other on the wrong axis, and the rotation canceled itself out in an explosive blast of blue-white blast.

Sighing, Shukaku put his mind away from the matter, returning to the seal scrawled out across the dune beneath him and its duplicate behind him. There was a particular interior character that had been bothering him- it seemed… extraneous to the actual storage seal itself, yet somehow still important. It didn't fit his current theories at all.

Chakra interference? Something about the overlapping lines forming a weave… but it was a chakra *emitter* , not the sort of conduit character that should have caused that effect. He'd prodded at the mechanism for *months,* with nothing to show for it- and he could feel the faint *frustration* he had against it all.

For a moment he considered returning to his personal project, but this was *important* . He could try again when he was finished.

The sun rose over a tanuki hard at work, and a desert landscape covered in a thousand iterations of shattered sealwork.

Eventually he deduced it played a role in making some sort of internal barrier which snapped shut like a net whenever the seal was damaged, safely removing its contents instead of shredding them into shredded spaghetti. A barrier, which, by his count, broke no less than six of the eight fundamental laws of sealing he'd devised.

He would insist until his dying breath that throwing a bijuudama into the desert was a perfectly valid response to this information.

Still, as he forlornly returned to his ever doubling sealing work, he wondered why his new understanding felt less like a victory and more like bitter mediocracy. As if he wasn't *fast enough* .

Zetsu- the idea of him, paragon of all the things he truly, *truly* hated, skulked ever at the edge of his mind, and he put all thoughts beside his work aside. It needed to be done. He *needed* a way to fight back.

He needed this- the *world* needed his dedication…

Two humans snuck into his sanctum, twenty years after he'd first carved it from the bones of wind country, the bedrock once cracked and cratered by Kaguya's rampage.

"Sand coffin." The rasp- "sand burial." Two humans died, crushed to death in an instant beneath the weight of his sand.

He returned to his work in a fowl mood, too disturbed- frustrated- to complete anything productive that night.

Translucent white shivered in the air as his chakra drained alarmingly fast, seal burning with a brilliant luminescence and such strength he could feel the faint will to *block* impressed on the natural energy around them. A small dusting of sand levitated smoothly from the floor, compacting into a hard sphere before flicking out gently against the barrier. Shukaku held his breath as it sailed through the air, gravity asserting its dominion.

The pebble clinked against the barrier and bounced off with a disappointingly mundane lack of explosions or shattered seals- just as Shukaku's chakra drained at an alarmingly fast rate. It was better than the last try, but *not good enough.* A barrier that drained a significant portion of a *bijuu's* chakra reserves for such a weak effect was something that clearly wasn't working correctly.

Letting the barrier flicker out of existence, he ground his sand together in frustration, remembering visions of scarlet fuuinjutsu which bound the Juubi with unbreakable force, Rinnegan and six paths senjutsu powered barriers the next best thing to unbreakable. In comparison to *that*- that pinnacle of sealing which *still* had failed to stop the near end of the world, this was… pitiful.

Pathetic. He needed to get *better* .

It was natural energy disruption. He must have been slipping if he had forgotten that the barrier matrix used in the seal would have only worked in absence of everything else. That also neatly explained why he hadn't been able to store anything yet living.

Dark eyes - weary- followed the progress of his most recent home invader- note, annoyance- as they desperately scurried through a maze of rose-tinted barriers, panes of energy anchored over a sprawling mess of seals traced in sand. A sharp shriek echoed through the underground chamber as one of the barriers snapped against the press of his foreign chakra- rendering that path of development obsolete- and the screech of metal on nothing as another held.

It was as good a way as any of determining their tolerance to *normal* levels of strength- and if they were stupid enough to delve into his den, and smart enough to make it there in the first place, they'd probably make good testing dummies.

A few hours of mindless testing later, the shinobi slumped to the ground, breath heaving in utter exhaustion. Stifling a sigh Shukaku scraped the last of his observations into the wall behind him before stepping out of the shadows. "Sand coffin." Gaara's attack was… perfect, really- simple, easy, and *powerful* .

The shinobi squeaked in terror as sand swept him up into a constricting embrace, chakra flaring with some form of killing intent

so pitifully weak as to barely register on his senses at all. “I- Ichibi- the barriers, were those yours?”

“Yeah.” He tried to make himself sound suitably intimidating and failed spectacularly, but if the shinobi’s pasty white skin and violent trembling were any indicator, he probably hadn’t needed to in the first place. “I have some questions.” He grilled the terrified shinobi about his internal chakra’s reaction to the barriers- constantly having to stop and explain terminology he didn’t know just so he could get a *slightest* idea of how well they were holding up.

“...I don’t know the rest. The… uh, tenketsu? Yeah- the tenketsu feel strained, and my coils feel warped- like something was trying to take my chakra and mix it, but blowing up…”

“That’s enough.” He’d gotten all the information he needed to fix some of the barrier’s most glaring problems. For a single second he hesitated- it *had* been enjoyable to explain his work like that- but he had a *purpose* . There was no time for something that could go so disastrously wrong.

He stared at his prisoner, wrapped in sand, his pale eyes glancing to every shadow in exhausted fear-

Steel. Strength- he turned back to his notes in disinterest, massive hand crushing into a fist. “ *Sand burial.* ”

A faint rumble shifted the careful array of sand he’d laid out- a crude, but effective looping spiral of connected lights to track chakra loss in a seal over time. He’d laid it out over the entire cavern floor- and, given its size, just… let it sit there. Maintain complete control would have been too difficult, even now, but it was a simple matter still to correct the blurred lines and restart the experiment-

Another faint rumble, making his sand shifting in frustration. *Annoying* . Hopefully whatever was causing that would stop soon-

The roof exploded inwards in a blast of burning heat, blazing light and cacophonies reverberating as massive chunks of stone crashed down. A lot of things happened in a very short amount of time, bewilderingly quick yet not so fast to put them outside the realm of his perception.

A tall, muscular man leapt forward with a cry. A veritable *crowd* of shinobi threw random, *insultingly weak* attacks at him. A shinobi wrapped in black bandages, only their eyes uncovered, tossed a giant puppet made of sticky clay toward him.

Two kunoichi working in tandem *tried to put him under a genjutsu* .

That snapped him out of his incredulous shock and into furious anger in the instant its chakra touched his and shattered. He supposed it was probably a strong genjutsu for the time, but against the most powerful compulsion to have ever been used he swept it away like air and dust, and *rage*- he let himself feel wrath for a moment, and in that instant the cave was filled with killing intent.

The muscular man struck his shoulder and blasted out a crater of sand with a painful sting even as he manipulated the conveniently freed chakra-rich sand from his arm into explosive seals. Even as everyone was still finishing with their initial attacks, the muscular man exploded in an impressive display of gore and fire.

The two genjutsu kunoichi were next, sand flowing into the matrix for a few simple barrier seals beneath them- the sheer *surprise* on their faces as they were trapped in a cube of glowing light was *priceless* .
“Wind release: great breakthrough!” A blast of air roared from his mouth with furious power, sending everything in its path tumbling until it slammed against the barrier, destabilizing it with… spectacularly destructive results.

The most powerful of the weaker fire attacks actually managed to reach him, furious flames splashing across his sand as the clay puppet sprinted forward to reach him- each thunderous step of its momentum only adding to the cacophony in the room.

A twitch of the puppet master's hand sent the puppet skyward in an impossibly acrobatic contortion, arms reaching- stretching, a *third* hand bursting out from the puppets back to halt its mad approach- just in time for it to land neatly before him, fist cocked back for a powerful blow.

Shukaku sneered inwardly as he retaliated with *monumentally* more force, ponderously swiping his tail toward the… annoyance. Burning golden eyes glanced up to the bandaged shinobi, watching his attention flicker to the dismembered kunoichi trio for a hint of a second before his entire body hardene in desolate determination. "Retreat!" Shukaku's tail landed on the puppet, easily smearing the construct across the floor- " *katsu!* "

Oh. Clay, the earlier rumbling, a unique activation phrase… the only logical answer was explosion release, he thought as the concussive force of the blast tossed him bodily into the air and *through the* top of his burrow, the light, noise, *impact* of the blast momentarily stunning him.

Beams of sunlight streamed through the shattered ceiling and choking dust, gleaming in a thousand iterations of the moment's dance as he crashed back to the floor, alert for any more threats in the concealing sands. Shadows flickered at the edge of his vision, yet a few seconds passed with no attacks.

They were running. They'd come here, to his domain where he bothered *nobody* , *specifically* prepared to subdue him with genjutsu, and then *ran* . He was a little mad-

Then he leapt out of the crater, saw the straight trail of destruction blasted through the maze he'd worked *so hard* on, and a *little mad* , was reevaluated to *furious.* The sand held in his control responded to his anger almost instinctively, tsunami-waves of sand crashing down on the fleeing shinobi- crushing force grinding the stragglers into the bedrock even as the forerunners found buried explosive seals blasting apart rock and flesh beneath them.

It was like a game- he was the cat and they were the mice- and no matter how far, no matter how fast, he could run *further, faster* .

Three shinobi faltered at a dead end, and Shukaku watched with apathetic disdain as they attempted to climb up the walls with chakra and experienced his explosive tags firsthand. A spike of sand each finished the job.

One tried to sacrifice themselves for their teammate, body engulfed in the furious chakra of the eight inner gates. It would have been *really* interesting if they'd managed to open the eight gate, but they only reached the fifth before internal stresses tore them apart in a wrenching dismemberment of their own movement.

Pathetic. He killed their companion and bounded back into the maze.

The explosion release nin turned out to be an engaging chase, aware of the tags buried beneath the sand enough that they never ran anywhere without lighting off a few explosives. It should have made them predictable, but the way they expertly wove false paths, paying no heed to any obstacle they could just *go through* - it made them hard to keep track of amidst the shrouding smoke and falling sand.

To a human, they would have certainly managed to escape in the labyrinth's rugged terrain. To *Shukaku* , who towered above the craggy spires and windswept stones, their *overall* path was ultimately clear. The moment he shunshined out of the labyrinthine rocks Shukaku slammed the entire area with a blast of wind, tossing the explosive release user into the- where they flipped off one of their own puppets and rocketed away.

For a single second Shukaku stared at the rapidly fleeing figure before loping into a run behind him. There was *no way* he was going to allow the person who *blew up his entire maze* to escape without at *least* dying. The crash of his steps on the desert cast entire dunes into the air behind him, each step like the tremors of an immense

drum- pounding, moving, *pushing forward* to a rhythm of wrath and righteous anger.

They couldn't keep running forever. Eventually their rocket would run out- eventually they'd run out of clay entirely, and then his victory would be assured. He leapt across a sandstone plateau in a single leap, eyes trained on the nin as his rocket's flames finally began to sputter out.

He landed in a city.

A *city* . A smear on the horizon from this distance, but when he'd first built his den there hadn't been *any* cities here- the only oasis wouldn't have been able to support more than a tiny town that had built up around it. Still, it stood- defiant against everything he'd suspected, against the entire knowledge of two lives to support his presumptions.

Two and a half hours later, a gaggle of injured shinobi limped back from the desert, blood drying on tattered uniforms and dripping from hastily bound injuries and missing limbs. A second group dragged themselves in mere hours after that, and a third only thirty minutes later.

There was nothing to the west of this city until the port cities rose where the desert met the sea… except *his* domain. These were the shinobi who'd attacked his home- these wounded nin so ragged, these nin who'd invaded and blown up *everything* . This, the city where they lived- the city *far too close* . No wonder he kept being interrupted more and more frequently…

Yang and yin, two to eight.

Black ball swirling, rotating, crushing the sand beneath him with the density of its chakra and igniting the winds of nature- sand screaming as it lashed the air in cyclical winds whirling- powerful. He could see the nin in the village awaken at the sensation of his near-fathomless chakra, too far away to do anything.

The bijuudama stabilized at just over the size of his head, thrumming with destructive potential- why wade into a difficult battle, if a single hit from afar could eliminate the annoyance?

When it hit the center of the city, the resulting explosion put anything the explosion release nin could do to shame. A shock of light and heat, a *snap* of air that pushed against him back even miles away, *almost* too loud- a rush of wind and the thermal of the molten stone pulling the smoke and dust into the air in a billowing cloud.

The smoking ruin of the city looked like a nuclear war-zone as he stepped close, pushing through the crumbling stone wall with sand following his tail like an obedient dog.

The city screamed.

He closed his ears and began to bury everything beneath a shifting wave of sand, each ponderous step crushing adobe and homes burnt and burning. People fled from his advance, but it was futile- they were civilians who'd not even followed the basic ninshu-

"Stop!" He couldn't quite place it, but the high pitched, wavering voice brought him short. "Don't- don't come any closer." Sand settled behind him in quiescent agitation as he looked down into the face of a girl who couldn't be more than ten. "I won't let you hurt my parents."

His killing intent sharpened at the sheer *gall* of this annoyance. The sands began to spill forward again, inching inevitably toward the girl and her family behind her-

Yet, against it all- tears ran down her face as she screamed- "stop! Stop you *monster* -" the words hit him twice as hard as any of the attacks he'd suffered in his den- because despite it all she *yet stood against him-*

Like a man who'd stood still before a row of tanks, for a belief he'd die for.

Like the soldiers who'd marched to their deaths against Indra's elite for an Asura not corrupted by the sorrows of war or Zetsu or both, to build a better world no matter the cost.

Like two men who'd stood in front of their mother, a god beyond the comprehension of mere mortal minds, and saved the world for it.

Inwardly, he cursed Indra, cursed Zetsu for binding him even after he was free.

Mostly he cursed himself as he turned around and left in silence, unwilling to look back at the smoking ruin casting its putrid smoke onto a cloudless sky.

Why. Wasn't. It. *Working!* The math had been correct, and his experiments had suggested a connection between a particular section of connectors and the metastability he so desperately needed in his barrier seal, but it just- wouldn't *work.* Either the math was wrong, or his sealing theory was wrong *again.*

He smashed the side of the cave in frustration and brought down the ceiling with a beautiful constellation of exploding tags and as the rocks crashed against him couldn't help but wonder about a time when fuuinjutsu used to be *fun* … and now he had to rebuild the warren.

Annoying . Perhaps he could understand what Kurama was getting at when he spoke of how he hated him.

He thought, at that moment, that he hated himself too.

One time while clearing the warren's floor for the next experiment, a thought drifted past the back of his mind. He could either remove Zetsu… or remove one of the pieces Zetsu so desperately needed to enact his plan. Seal himself away to dreamless sleep, escape this cursed existence and save the world… he dismissed the thought in

an instant, returning his focus more thoroughly to the fuuinjutsu experiments at hand. As much as he had no time for personal projects, he also had no time for idle fantasies.

Yet, the years grew long.

As the moon wheeled in celestial rotation, always there in the back of his mind- as the sun cast its ceaseless rays against the desiccated corpses, the dry bones of what travelers called the demon's labyrinth, he pulled further and further from the domain of air and light- for what need had he of the sun when sealwork was better performed indoors. Discoveres build on each other as he inched slowly, so impossibly slowly toward a more complete theory-

He hated it. Fuuinjutsu was never anything less than frustrating anymore, an endless cycle of development- seals that eventually performed their function but could never be built into the truly powerful techniques he'd need to fight gods like Asura. He hated how his mind would wander, and how when he focused he could never get rid of the thought- of a girl, calling him *monster.*

Of a brother with nine tails and an angry snarl who spoke to him of idiocy and *weakness* . Never enough- not seals nor sand- he was a Sasuke to Zetsu's Naruto, Madara to Hashirama, outstripped. *Inferior* .

Of a swirling, dreaming of red eyes bleeding and pinwheels defying fate, remnants of remnants etched by *himself* , unbreakable because they were mere nightmares of his own creation. They whispered to him and he *hated* it- a fool, a fool.

Fuuinjutsu projects simply… stopped holding his attention for long. Scrounging up the motivation to push forward- because Zetsu was *waiting* , always working- was a chore. Doable, but a *chore* . His chakra felt leaden in the cavern's perpetual gloom.

Once he started, he *hated* . Just… everything. The circumstance of his life- couldn't he not have remained in that- something- before

he’d been reincarnated into this immortal shell? Could he have not lived amongst the peaceful *humans* of earth, the father and sister and three friends who weren’t monsters like the rest?

He wanted to sleep.

Ten years- perhaps, for time bled beneath the constant gloom of his sealed warren- later, he stood in the center of a vast spiral, stone compacted into the shape of a foot-tall teapot placed perfectly within its center. A perfect chakra storage seal- a circle in a spiral in a circle, energy set on a loop neverending.

For a moment as he drained chakra into the seal he dreamed of eight siblings who might, one day, find something redeemable in humanity-

It flashed blue, and with the draw of a hook as wide as inevitability, he *fell asleep* .

“ *Can’t… rumors are spreading…”*

“ *That’s the point. They… find it.* ” The faint impression of white fur and hooves-

Red tail tips- “ *terrible! He… happens to… is deserved. Leave it lie-* ”

“ *Never* .” Resolute. He dreamed of resolution and determination so impossibly vast. It was a good dream.

“ *Do… you will… learnt his lesson. Don’t betray…”*

“I… not betray… family.”

A long pause, where only the darkness of death-not-death lulled him to a calm sleep. It was peaceful, he didn’t think, not having to worry about the fate of all life all the time.

Oh. Color again- white flickers and sharp teeth, and tentacles. “ *So I do… inspired. Do you… will work?* ”

“ *It must.”*

Darkness.

Faint emotion, this time- sorrow, determination like diamond.

Anger. Fox’s incandescent wrath against determination, losing again as it always had, time and time again- always would. If only his was still so resolute…

Asleep, he could feel no thing.

Mind adrift, he dreamed of impossible things, and family.

Chakra flickered- a faint sensation, so close yet also more distant than the stars. A touch of chakra against the bindings that held his chakra tight, against the sleep enforced- like flickering lights, three hundred and sixty one points of brilliance-

The lid of the teapot shifted slightly- the lines of the seal disconnected, a spiral broke and he was awake in an instant- so fast it was jarring. Sand and chakra erupted from within the container, precipitating from the air until the hazy silhouette of a tanuki towered the human who’d messed with his seal.

As he faded into corporeality, he spoke a single question- “ *why* ?”

“Uh- Ichibi-sama?” The kunoichi who’d freed him was still staring up in shocked fear, but a shift of his sand- entirely unintentional- was enough to shock her into talking. “I... I didn’t know! The rumor across the continent was that there was an incredible treasure to be found in the demon’s labyrinth, locked away… I didn’t realize it would be the *Ichibi* - no offense, your magnificence-”

“Enough.” He paused, a long moment spent in stillness, then sighed, crumpling to the ground bonelessly. Apparently, he couldn’t even do

this right. “...thank you. Thank you very much.”

For the first time in decades, he let someone *live* - watching as she scrambled out of his den, terrified

A weak smile flickered across his face.

It felt nice.

“Why did you do it?” The shared minscape spread out before him just at it always had- vast and empty and blank but for the visage of his sibling. “Well? Why’d you start the rumors-” he flinched into a defensive stance as Kokuo leaped towards him, but the expected blows never came.

Five tails wrapped around him in a crushing embrace as Kokuo sobbed into his sand. “ *Don’t* do that again you- you *idiot* . You fool! You- you worried me…” his voice cracked- and a selfish piece of himself wished the moment never had to end. “I- you- you can’t *do* that. You- you could have been trapped forever- no sun and grass and fire and water and- you-”

“I think what Kokuo’s trying to say is that *we’re* sorry.”

Kokuo sniffed softly, slipping out of the hug to stand by Gyuki and Chomei. “Kurama’s not.”

Shukaku chuckled softly at the thought, letting himself step back from the edge of tension he’d been standing once since he’d entered the shared mindscape. “Is this the part where I apologize back for causing everyone to hate you?”

Chomei bounced a bit happily, wings buzzing in… excitement, probably- “yep!” Gyuki *glared* at her and she positively *wilted* . It had been… *so long* since he’d last experienced the bug’s energetic moods. “Uh… I meant, no? Yeah, no!”

Gyuki snorted softly and dragged Chomei away by the tails- probably to talk about appropriate behavior, or maybe to just escape the awkward air- but either way it left him alone in Kokuo as he shuffled his hooves nervously in the sudden silence. “I…Shukaku.” He bit at his lip for a second then deflated with a sigh, half-groan. “I don’t know how to put this. I was never… never good at this sort of thing… Shukaku. Shukaku, I *love you* . I will cherish you always- even when I told you to go away I was trying to… something! My thoughts were turbulent, then.” His eyes met his, so *earnestly* - “I’ve been a bad brother but… Shukaku. Please, if you listen to nothing else, listen to this.”

Shukaku knew what he’d say. He’d told it to their father in their infrequent talks by the fire, and his father had told it to them as he lay amidst the last time they’d all been together-

This time, Shukaku was the one who stepped into the hug as his brother whispered, all of emotion at the tip of his tongue- “Shukaku. I will always love you.”

He’d died, but as the bijuu were wont to do he’d *lived* - and this time he’d found his family.

A new legend, of the beast who’d tricked the explorer into freeing a monster slowly trickled into the common parlance of fireside tales and horror stories, whispered to children in the dark of night-

A cautionary tale. Don’t listen to monsters.

To one tanuki, the trickster’s legend was a reminder- a promise- that there would always be someone out there willing to love even him.

The vastness of the desert spread lonely around him, perfect dunes casting long shadows counterpoint in the moonlight- the wind whistling against the darkness, overhead, its breath the glittering of a millions stars spilled across the sky.

Shukaku *breathed* , standing so solemnly alone, yet more relaxed than he'd been in *years* as his glimmering light destabilized and failed. Still… there was just something about it that felt… light. There was no… pressure, no self-inflicted demand to always be better, find out more and more- just… he just had to *do* , and it was enough.

Chakra shifted above an outstretched palm, flickering blue bleeding out into swirling weaves, spinning and spinning and just so energetically pulling all his attention to a simple task, letting him forget about the stress he'd been putting on himself. About past mistakes and future possibilities- and in the moment, he lived, remembered, and laughed- at himself, at old happy memories.

If there was anything having a twenty-first century psychological base in a heinously unsympathetic world did for him, it was letting him laugh at the truly *terrible* mental health decisions he'd made.

As the blue swirled together, moving faster and faster until it hummed with barely restrained energy, the last components slowly fitting into place, he let himself just… enjoy the moment of something done entirely for *fun* .

The last piece snapped into place, and the instability became *so incredibly stable-*

" *Rasengan,* " he intoned, and in the sovereignty of a wind country night, a sphere of brilliant blue sat perfectly cusped in the palm of Ootsutsuki Shukaku's hand.

Poor Shukaku. At least he's getting better, tho. Finally, we get to the comfort part of the hurt/comfort train.

Also, remember that time I said we were going to have short chapters? Well, uh, I lied.

Rest for the Weary

Chapter 8: Rest for the Weary

Sometimes, he'd just sit there and watch the spinning blue light, its electric blue luminescence casting sharp shadows in monstrously grotesque forms across the dunes. Two things, in contrast- a person, and the memory of darkness-

As the years bled, time endlessly moving, stars drifting in pinprick constellations, he began to feel free.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Learning to relax was probably the hardest thing Shukaku had ever done. It was just so dramatically against everything he'd done before that the ways he'd pushed himself into doing things were worse than useless. Thinking about Zetsu only ever made him want to drop everything and focus on *that* with single minded intensity, and *refusing* to think about Zetsu made him feel so much more inferior than he already was.

It was a delicate balance- not too little that he felt he wasn't *doing* anything, but not too much that it would become a chore. He hadn't touched fuuinjutsu development more than a few minor projects since he'd been freed, and still he felt the need to drop everything and *figure it out* - and everything else felt like a poor substitute for the vaunted practice. Nevertheless, he kept trying- he had *centuries* before anything had to be put into practice.

The fact that his family was *there* - that they still loved him… it was enough to make him *keep trying* . He'd not let them down again.

Years passed like water, sand shifting in endless eddies out across the desert- under the weight of time, his labyrinth only deadlier by the decade. Eventually that delicate of progress and leisure became less burningly frustrating and more second nature- a hundred little things-

Slowly shaping the sand together, pulling together the rock and repairing the gaping wounds blasted through his labyrinth by a myriad of nin who thought themselves *so clever* .

Making a fuuinjustu barrier to trigger a few particularly large explosions if the crags he'd just spent so working got randomly obliterated. *Shinobi* , he couldn't help but chuckle inwardly- *danger* sign was like an invitation for those fools, one with flashing lights and a *stealable things inside* note tacked on the side.

At least they'd… mostly… stopped trying to kill him- he never even ran into random shinobi in his warren anymore, and most of the times he found one above ground they just… ran away.

That was another thing he was working on- *finally* freeing himself from the instinctual response to just *kill* everyone he came across. It wasn't even something Kokuo nagged him about, like taking time off from fuuinjutsu or to try some more artistic endeavors- as if seals weren't an *art form* , the ignorant bijuu- the horse probably wouldn't have cared if he went and killed a few more cities. It was just… like letting go, a breath held too long- a hatred he didn't need to keep internalizing again and again.

He let the ones who chose to leave, live- a command in silent condemnation, and in doing so released himself from the bonds of- *red, spinning* , ever watching, quiet memories he'd like to forget.

Sometimes, during the nights his fuuinjutsu projects started to wear on him, he'd bound away to the deep desert so lone and level, spinning rasengan after rasengan as he kept careful watch over the horizon for nothing, and everything. He'd think of the future and, sometimes, it didn't even weigh down on him like an unliftable

weight. He let go- of its crushing approach- the nervous anticipation of possibility, of so many things only half-remembered, and the endless dread of marching time.

Sometimes he'd try, and fail, to imbue his wind affinity into the rasengan. Sometimes, he'd just sit there and watch the spinning blue light, its electric blue luminescence casting sharp shadows in monstrously grotesque forms across the dunes. Two things, in contrast- a person, and the memory of darkness-

As the years bled, time endless moving, stars drifting in pinprick constellations, he began to feel *free* .

It was rare, but he sometimes ran into civilians in the meandering expanse of his domain. Unlike the nin who cut into the edges of his labyrinth they were truly helpless- the sheer cliff walls too difficult to climb without the help of chakra, the sands thick and deep for pack animals and wagons.

Shukaku couldn't help but find it fascinating, how even then a few would bravely push forward into the rocky maze. He supposed it made sense from a purely logical point of view- his domain was in the center of wind country, and if you didn't get lost in its maddening turns then it could make a journey of months into a jaunt of mere weeks. The explosive tags calibrated to chakra use wouldn't trigger for them, so most of *their* danger was in getting lost and dying of thirst.

Most of the time, he just watched them struggle forward- their actions so very *human* - triumph of death, more bones to litter the sands of the labyrinth, freedom or freedom in death. Sometimes he'd walk beside them and laugh at how *terrified* they were of his silent presence- or, in a few notable cases, convinced themselves he was nothing but a particular persistent fabrication of the mind.

Rarely, so very rarely, he'd listen to their stories and wonder at the uniqueness of it all- their plight, their desperation or arrogance that

led them to delve into a place even shinobi feared. How marvelous the world spread out beyond mere sand and wind was, cities and *societies* , trade and destructive conflict weaving together into just a part of the tapestry that was- time, humanity's enemy and its greatest tool.

From those travelers it learned so many fascinating things. The ocean trade with the other continent collapsed for a few years, once, leaving thousands impoverished. Earth and wind country got in a border dispute over fang country, which was apparently a wind country vassal. Petty conflicts and news of an empire from *iron country* of all places conquering the entire continent.

One had gone into a *very colorful* tirade about how foolish the emperor was to expect the Senju and Uchiha to 'stop getting off to stabbing each other,' before spinning a story of secret assassination wars. It had taken all his not inconsiderable willpower to stop himself from laughing at the thought.

To the few he talked to, he made sure they left the maze with their lives. It was the least they could do.

It was the most he could do.

Three hundred years passed in fairly idyllic peace, and- towards the end- Shukaku thought he might have even figured out what Kokuo meant by *rest* .

The winds of change came with the scent of acrid smoke from the east and faint rage in the back of his mind. He'd felt it as he finagled with the fine details of the different kinds of sand- and earth- he could control, trying and failing to use earth release to make sandstone instead of its usual indeterminate composition.

A faint series tremble- barely enough to disturb his jury-rigged seismometer seal- but unique enough to pique his interest enough to

make him drop the poor failure of a sculpture and bound to the surface.

The sun wavered in a faint haze. The air tasted like smoke.

Rage burned behind the back of his mind.

He sighed and leapt back into his warren. Hopefully he wouldn't have to deal with… whatever this was. It sounded distinctly unrestful, and Kokuo would politely hound him *forever* . No, ignoring the irony of fire country being on fire was probably for the best.

Two days later, smoke and ash from *iron* country drifted across the desert skies, and Shukaku began to have a disturbingly strong suspicion as to what had happened.

When not even a year later his labyrinth turned into a warzone as part of wind country's bid for the empire's empty throne, he knew he was correct.

"...this is the sand demon? He's really scary!"

"... *quiet!* " The two voices were but whispers, but against the regular silence of his warren they stood out like particularly loud explosives. He cracked open an eye as two figures paused at the far end of his sanctum- not quite right by the edge, the smaller figure slipping off the larger's back. "...stay right here. *Don't* come closer."

" *Okay!* " The voice was startlingly small for a shinobi, but he didn't dare dismiss the nin as they stayed put, hidden in the shadows of a rocky wall. From his experience with shinobi trying to kill him, it was always the ones who stayed in the back that would cast the most randomly powerful jutsu.

The larger of the two darted forward, katana clutched smoothly in her hand, steps lithe and smooth. To her credit he probably wouldn't

have noticed her had she not spoken with the way she neatly avoided the tripwire barriers and hidden explosive tags littered across the floor with perfect precision until she stood right in front of him, her breathing slow and even as to maintain her stealth.

For a long moment she just… stood there, quietly waiting- opening her mouth as if to speak, then pausing and glancing back to the second nin in the shadows.

Honestly, the indecision was starting to get on his nerves. “Sand coffin.” The kunoichi squeaked in startled shock and flipped away, but he’d been using his sand for hundreds of years and *he was faster* . Not more than three seconds, and she was already bound… pathetic, really, but there was a *reason* nobody but the suicidally brave- and foolish- tried to attack him anymore. “What are you doing here?”

“I- Ichibi-sama! This one begs your patience for trespassing. Please-” her voice cracked slightly as she tried frantically to look at the shinobi in the shadows, only for the sand to restrain her. “...bad idea… please, at least spare my daughter this fate.”

“Why?”

A flicker of a smile flashed across the woman’s face. “She’s a civilian. As it is, I’ve not ever heard a story of you killing civilians.”

He frowned. Bringing her daughter to a battle with the Ichibi seemed like the height of stupidity to him.“I kill everyone who enters my warren.”

“Everyone who enters your warren has so far been a shinobi.”

Shukaku scowled- this human was being *frustrating* . “You know *nothing*- nothing at all. You’ve given yourself to your mercy assuming I *have* any, and now you’ll both die in the heart of my domain.”

For a long moment there was silence between them, sandy blue eyes staring into burning gold, a hint of Shukaku's killing intent flaring into existence. "...liar." There was a calm certainty to the word that *infuriated* him- "you'll rend me limb from limb and happily bury my bones beneath the sand, but you won't kill Okimi."

Shukaku tightened his sand reflexively as frustration roiled beneath his skin, eliciting a hiss of pain from the kunoichi. "You can't possibly know that for certain."

"A story my mother…" she wheezed in a breath against the tight sound, face pale with pain and fear- "our ancestor… the one thing she never told anyone but her daughter as she diligently laid the groundwork for our kekkei genkai. She told me… the demon she freed *thanked* her-"

"Leave mom *alone!* " The shinobi who'd been hiding in the darkness- the child, a girl who couldn't have been more than six- ran up to him and delivered a remarkably ineffectual kick to his leg that stunned him for longer than some of the most powerful attacks he'd ever seen. What was it with little girls and their ability to just- run up and deal crippling emotional damage?

Something *shifted* in his sand- foreign chakra brushing against his own in his instant of indecision and shoving it out of the way with all the force of a hammer to the head. The sand of his sand coffin shifted, just for a second, but it was enough for the kunoichi to shunshin in front of her daughter. Her sword screeched with flickering wind chakra, an admittedly impressive killing intent pouring out of her.

He looked at the girl, then back to the bristling kunoichi. "What are you running from, that death by terrifying sand monster would be preferable?"

The kunoichi narrowed her eyes, killing intent sharpening into a blade-edge prickling. "Sabaku clan *tyrants* . They have a monopoly on anything to do with sand manipulation, and take… *great* …

offense to anything that might oppose that. In our case, they find our sand release… *interesting* .” Her eyes were *piercing,* and he couldn’t help but remember what Matatabi would be like, fiery in her readiness to strike out. “I won’t allow you to *touch* my daughter, but I won’t allow them to control us either. I was running out of options.”

The universe really wanted to play a cruel joke on him today, didn’t it? Just to be contrary he snaked out a tendril of sand, forming them into a pair of tanuki ears atop Okimi’s head. Trauma trigger number one- or, the mother as it was- puffed up in fury as his deep laughter rumbled through the chamber. “You wanted me to kill you, kill the invading nin, then… let your daughter die in the desert? Six year old humans are remarkably unable to do that.” He could get not wanting to be controlled, though.

“I said I was running out of-”

“I’m *eight* you- you meanie!” Shukaku made the sand ears lay flat on her head, making her look almost scarily similar to a kicked puppy. His laughter only intensified as the kunoichi tried and failed to wrest control of the sand ears from him- paying rapt attention as he was, near *nothing* would be able to usurp control of his sand.

“You also seem to have some very cute little ears.”

Okimi perked up in an instant, anger forgotten. “Really?” She felt at the ears above her head for a moment in wonder, then blinked, and scowled in sudden anger. “I don’t need to be *cute* - I’m going to be the strongest kunoichi ever, then blow up all the bad metal sand men ever!” She tugged at her ears, only to be thwarted as her hands slipped unimpeded through the sand.

The kunoichi blinked as she watched her daughter pull ineffectually at the ears in her hair.“You’re not bad with kids, for being… well, the *Ichibi* . I was expecting a lot more bloodlust. And general murderous desire.”

“It’s been a long time-” it had, oh how it had, those halcyon days with his unembittered siblings so many ages ago- “but I still remember a bit-” and then a quad of nin surrounded by swirling metallic dust had to jump in and absolutely *ruin* the moment.

Well Shukaku found it was a *bit* funny to see their reactions as their quarry spoke cordially with the Ichibi, daughter playing games with his sand. In the moments before they were simultaneously crushed under a tsunami of sand, and exploded for good measure. Grisly, but effective, and he supposed he’d appreciate the extra metal…

“Whoh.” Okimi had stopped playing with the tanuki ears to stare in starry eyed wonder at the morass of crushing sand settling at his burrow’s entrance. “You… killed all the bad sand men *so fast!* You’re the best!” She turned those earnest, wide eyes to him, mad grin clinging to her face. “I’m going to be just like you when I grow up!”

Shukaku looked to the kunoichi helplessly as Okimi ran up to him and poked at the sand of his leg with curiously innocent wonder.

It was her turn to just smirk, and laugh.

Just to the edge of his labyrinth, he told them. It was *dangerous* - purposefully so- in the winding corridors of sand and stone, and he’d feel terrible if little Okimi got her leg blown off by one of the exploding seals *he’d* placed.

At the edge of the vast emptiness of the desert, as Okimi hounded him for ‘awesome sand stuff’ in her adorably persistent way, he told himself- just a little further. Just until they reached their destination, then he’d leave.

Just until they were safe.

They were going… somewhere. Two weeks of essentially random movement later, the kunoichi was forced to admit she really hadn’t

had any ideas beyond killing the four Sabaku nin who'd been following her, which left *Shukaku* as the one plotting their course.

The same Shukaku who hadn't traveled more than a hundred miles from his domain in like… five centuries.

Mindscape it was.

He dropped into the shared mindscape as they rested in the shade of a rocky plateau north and east of his labyrinth, its towering spires enough to shroud even his form from a casual glance, letting the blank landscape of the mind overwrite reality. He was alone, for the moment, so the impetus was on him to convey the message, and he did- sending a faint impression of his task and request to the other bijuu.

Kurama was the first to drop into the shared mindscape, fury crackling around him like putrid fire as he jumped at him. " *Pathetic.* You, *you*- helping a human after everything they've done to you? To *us* ?" He looked *murderous* .

Ah. He'd made a mistake in projecting the thought to *all* the bijuu. Then Kurama plowed into him like a meteor of pure *intent to kill* , and such petty things as *regret* and *not being in pain* immediately ceased to be very relevant at all.

Shukaku barely dodged the bite at his head but the sheer *bulk* of the kitsune at speed wasn't something he could just *leap aside* from, and he got to experience the delightful feeling of getting dragged across shattering stone with an angry Kurama standing on top of him. His tail lashed out in an instinctive seep, only to be blocked by *three* of Kurama's, six more lashing out to bind him in place.

Forget vastly more power, more tails was just *unfair* .

Still, there were a *few* things he was good at, sand twisting into a flurry of explosive seals with *just* enough force for him to get the few free seconds he needed to charge a bijuudama. The look on

Kurama's face just before he got blasted into the air was *very* satisfying, as was the pure *fury* he shot his way when he landed only to get bound in his most robust sealing barrier.

Shukaku stepped up beside him, lines of sand spilling out to reinforce the barrier with a few others which wouldn't interfere with its function. "Had enough of your tantrum, Kurama?"

"An army. They sent an *army* after me, Shukaku. I've done nothing to them and they want to *kill me*- they *killed all the kitsune* ." Kurama's killing intent felt like staring into the sun from three and a half feet away. "That was their goal. They *knew* most of their samurai wouldn't even land a hit on me- so they went for the innocent foxes instead."

"You've already killed the ones responsible, and a million others besides."

" *You* wouldn't understand-"

Shukaku *snarled* . Kurama really knew how to push his buttons. "It wasn't my *fault!* The others more or less understand- *I* wasn't the one that caused them to hate us. Humans aren't uniformly evil, Kurama-" well, only Kokuo and Chomei could get behind that-

"Be. *Silent!* " Chakra swirled around the fox in a furious shroud, pressing down against the mindscape with the sheer weight of its density- a power surpassing his own ninefold, again and again pressed into a single black ball swirling, growing. At twice the size of himself it hung there for a moment as Kurama's judging eyes glared daggers. "You disgust me. One day, they'll take everything from you and you'll understand they should not be suffered to live-" and the bijuudama fired, shattering hsi barriers like glass and paper and sending him tumbling for miles.

The whole mindscape shook beneath the blast, cracks spreading through the stone in the perfect radial synchronicity only achievable in dreams. Shukaku groaned, struggling to his feet- only for a powerful blow from Kurama's tails to slam him back into the ground.

Seals writ in sand swept out in a spiraling web, only to be immolated in the breadth of foxfire.

Again, a paw slammed his back down to the floor, and the only thought Shukaku parsed as he looked up was that his brother's tears truly traced a somber sight in the firelight of his unending wrath.

" *Shukaku!* " A bijuudama flashed by over his head, tossing Kurama away from him as a flaming blue blur jumped after it, followed in the next second lashing tentacles and pounding hooves skidding to a stop beside him. "Are you okay? I mean- uh- we're here, now. We felt the bijuudama. You should have just *left the mindscape* , you stupid- um, silly."

A faint smile cracked into existence as he stared into the Kokuo's concerned face. "I'm glad… you're the one that came. Chomei would demand to come *with* me…" two bijuu would *probably* be an excessive guard for Okimi and her mother.

"Thanks?" He glanced over to where Kurama was trying and failing to pin town Gyuki, and getting batted at by Matatabi for even daring to try. "I… I'm glad you're here too." Skukaku ground his sand for a second in frustration- this awkward dance of guiltily greeting him had been perversely satisfying for the first few decades- just a bit of satisfaction at watching him squirm for everything his siblings had done to him. It had been *three hundred years* , though, and still Kokuo was clearly convinced that if left to his own devices he'd invent a seal to throw himself into the sun or something.

He was willing to just… let it go. Kokuo didn't seem to have that in his dictionary of emotional maldevelopment, though.

"Yes, yeah, it's nice to see you again." The mindscape rumbled one last time beneath the force of double bijuudama, and then settled with Kurama wrapped up in Gyuki's tentacles. "So- here's the issue I was going to tell you guys about before Kurama so rudely interrupted me. I've got two humans- former imperials with a kekkei genkai-

being chased by a belligerent clan, and I need somewhere *completely* safe for them."

"You can't just keep them, right?"

Shukaku slumped in exasperation. "No, and Chomei can't either. I don't think they'd have much fun trapped in a cave for the rest of their lives. I was thinking lightning country, but besides being way out of the way for wind nin, there's nothing there that'll actually *keep them safe.* "

Gyuki's deep voice interjected before Kokuo could complete his musings. "Uzushiokagure."

"Yep!" Matatabi slipped in beside them, smoke trailing off phantom wounds yet still perky from her victory over Kurama. "They're like- incredible. Nobody attacks them and lives- if you can get them in, then they'll be safe from *anything* . They're super good at sealing."

" *I'm* good at sealing."

"Oh. Right… then it'd be doubly good-" she shared a glance with Gyuki, then nodded, face grim. "Sorry. I don't think we should wait long- Gyuki and I are going to go and stop Kurama from taking out his anger on humanity."

Gyuki nodded solemnly. "Even if I don't agree with your arguments as to their worth, father wouldn't have wanted for this to be their end." They bowed, forms fading out of the mindscape to leave only Kokuo behind.

"Hey… be safe. Keep the lucky humans safe too- they'll love being around someone as awesome as you are." That was Kokuo at his finest- no matter how awkward it got, there was never the impression of disingenuity.

Shukaku smiled, brushing his tail over Kokuo's back. "Love you, little brother-"

“Hey! I’m *older*- ” but he was already fading to wakefulness.

The sun had risen scarlet bright as he’d slept, and in waking the small fire they’d been sitting around had burned down to embers and ashes. Tired bags hung beneath the kunoichi’s watchful eyes, ever so often flickering to where Okimi laid nestled up against his sand. She glanced up, imploring- “where?”

“Whirlpool.” The home of the Uzumaki.

Destination set, they trudged onwards beneath the radiance of rising light of dawn.

Yeah, sand release and magnet release are different things in this story (because I said so) because I didn't do my research before I'd already formed an idea about the difference between the two kekkei genkai. (I mean, it makes sense at a glance- gaara has his sand from shukaku, and his iron sand from his bloodline.) For those curious, both kekkei genkai are earth/wind.

Also, sue me, but normal sand isn't even close to magnetic.

Shukaku: no I will absolutely not deal with this-

Okimi: *puppy eyes*

Shukaku: fine okay

Whirlpool Eye

Chapter 9: Whirlpool Eye

“No. No. I don’t allow it!” He pulled at the depths of memories from a time before, pulled at the depths of his chakra as he gently lifted her off the ground, sand scouring the earth for all that’d been lost. “You will not die!”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fire flickered before him, a spark of gentle light in the otherwise desolate desert, shadows stretching infinite into the vast inky depths of the night. Stars glittered above them in perfect constellations- celestial lights illuminating, wind-worn spires silhouetted against the glittering sky.

The kunoichi poked at the fire, carefully feeding it the thorny brambles they’d torn out of the desert crags- silent and solemn, her expression missing some of the vibrancy it carried during the day. Then she glanced to where Okimi lay nestled in the crook of his elbow, and that faint smile of hers returned- a quirk of the lips, a gentle confidence and just *joy* .

A tendril of sand levitated from the ground, wringing itself in awkward circles for half a moment before it smothered the fire with nary a sound. Neat, precise- her sand release was remarkably good for someone who hadn’t been using it for several hundred years.

He shifted a little closer in interest, careful not to dislodge Okimi. “Why do you use a sword?”

The kunoichi blinked, evidently confused at the inquiry. “It’s a sword? I use it to stab people- why do you care, anyways?”

“I’m just interested. Your sand release is a far more powerful weapon than a mere sword; its versatility is endlessly more than a blade of steel.”

“Sand release is *nice* , but tsunamis of sand and *damned perfect defenses* are more of a Sabaku clan thing.” She hesitated, for a moment picking at the sand still swirling over the firepit with her chakra a little nervously. “I- I was a samurai-” the words poured out in a rush, and a faint tinge of pink dusting her ears beneath her dun hair. “Before the Kyuubi destroyed the empire, the Sabaku clan couldn’t do anything to me so long as I served the state.”

“Ah- and after Kurama’s rampage, the empire’s collapse meant you no longer had the protection you needed against the Sabaku.” It made sense, especially if Sabaku had already been a clan of such importance as to drive their enemies and prey to such lengths for safety.

The deep furrow on the kunoichi’s brow spoke to the length of her befuddlement. Perhaps she hadn’t expected him to understand so easily? It wouldn’t be the first time a human had tried something so stupid as assuming him *unintelligent*- “Kurama? Who’s that?”

“The Kyuubi. My older brother.”

“You’re- you’re name’s not Ichibi?” The embarrassed blush on her face was furious now. “I- I’ve been calling you that in my head for the past *two weeks* we’ve been together!”

Shukaku rolled his head in exasperated disinterest, careful not to do something stupid like flick his tail at her. She wasn’t one of his siblings- their playful conversations would be… extremely deadly to her. “You’re good at extrapolation- Ichibi is not, in fact, my name.”

“I’m not stupid- if *nine tails* isn’t the nine tailed fox’s name, then it only stands to reason that *Ichibi* isn’t yours.” The annoyed look she sent him was drier than the deserts, and more frustration-filled than

dreaming overly-complicated old barrier seals. “Please- did you really think I was that slow?”

He choked back a gust of laughter, contenting himself with a soft shake of the head. “No… well, maybe a little bit- your original plan for Okimi was… startlingly bad. Almost disturbingly so.”

“You couldn’t do better!”

“I most definitely could. Either way-” he ignored the dignified pout sent his way- “you’d be surprised at the blind spot humans can have when it comes to the bijuu. I’ve had shinobi try to kill me by leaving out poisoned cattle.”

She squawked, clearly offended on his behalf- “but you don’t even *eat!* ”

“ *Exactly* . Humans can be stupid.” He chuckled, softly, low- and the kunoichi giggled beside him- just a long moment spent in solidarity at sometimes-nature of humanity. Okimi shifted cutely in her sleep at the deep nose, nestling further into the sand of his arm now the fire’s warmth had faded.

The kunoichi calmed- eventually, reclined into a sandy bed of her making, composed eyes staring thoughtfully at up at his own. “What is it, then?” He didn’t answer for a long moment- “your name. You’re not Ichibi, and I’m *do* feel somewhat bad for just… assuming. I should know better…”

“Don’t stress over it. Our names are both treasure and a question away.” The good-humored playfulness drained away, replaced by memories- echoes of a time so far ago yet exerting their sovereignty over him. She wasn’t *anything* like Asura, but she certainly wasn’t like Indra, either- calm and collected, expressive yet professional… perhaps that was his own issue, tying everything back into the curse of that time. “Either way, I’ve been calling *you* kunoichi in my head for just as long.”

“Then it’ll be an exchange.” A faint grin spread across her face, but he could see the deadly seriousness in her eyes- the depths of conviction in her words. The type that swore that even if nothing else had been important, *this* - this moment *was* . “I’m Tora. Please take care of me.”

He stared out to the vast and empty landscape surrounding them, the remnant of time, and memory- perhaps it had been long enough- and when he spoke it was but the whisper of crushing sand. “ *Shukaku* .”

Sometimes it was hard for him to realize just how ridiculously he outclassed most everything on the planet. He’d spent so long focusing on getting strong enough to face unfairly powerful threats like Indra that when it came time for him to face normal shinobi he often spent longer looking at the pretty sand smears than actually *fighting* .

Needless to say, the Sabaku hunter nin learnt firsthand that night why fighting a bijuu was typically reserved for the insane and Ootsutsuki descendants- though the two weren’t that mutually exclusive. More the opposite really. It really put Minato’s sheer capability into perspective, though.

There was no fire that night- not with the hunting squads close on their trail. Okimi complained bitterly but quieted down quickly enough when her mother promised to teach her a ‘cool jutsu’ to keep her mind off the desert night’s cold

Henge, as it was. Tora grasped her daughter's hands in her own, carefully bending her fingers into the correct hand seals as she explained the technique. “ *Imagine* what you want- you’re a clever girl, so it shouldn’t be too hard to get a good image of what you want- then mold the chakra, perform the hand seals like I showed you, and *will* yourself to change. Like putty, eh? Try something small- leave the complete transformation for later.”

“Okay!” She scrunched her face in concentration, chakra beneath her skin waking lethargically beneath her concentration, pushed forward by what he could only assume was remarkably effective control for an eight year old girl. It brimmed on the tip of her fingers, invisible yet furiously *present* - the energy of her life, vibrant still despite everything she’d gone through. “Uh- *dog, boar, ram* - henge!” The chakra twisted on itself in Indra’s familiar patterns, and a puff of smoke blasted into existence for a few long seconds.

When it faded, it revealed Okimi’s proud grin, and two tanuki ears nestled neatly atop her head.

Tora clapped excitedly, sweeping her up into a hug and gently ruffling her hair- just enough not to break the henge, but still far too much for her not to squirm halfheartedly in an attempt to escape. “Good choice! Keep in mind that it doesn't take much for the technique to fail.”

“Not *my* technique! I’m the most powerful ninja *ever* , now-” a fact which was immediately disproved as Tora pulled at the ears lightly, dispelling them in a puff of smoke.

“Don’t let it get to your head. Now you just need to practice until it’s second nature.” Okimi nodded in adorable resolve, scampering over to Shukaku’s arm in an attempt to steal his precious warmth. He didn’t even *have* fire release- how she found any appreciable warmth in his sand was beyond him. Maybe she just liked the seething calm of his Juubi-adjacent chakra? “And… she’s gone.” An incredibly fond look hung from her face like the stars from the sky. “Precocious brat.”

“She understood the technique quickly. I think. When I was eight I could barely move a glob of sand around.”

Tora raised an eyebrow in incredulity. “Somehow, looking at just how *deftly* you manipulate chakra, I find that hard to believe.”

“You understand the relation between chakra reserves and control, yeah?” She nodded, and he just smirked in return. “Imagine being

born with the reserves of a bijuu.”

She winced softly at the thought, yet a bit of incredulous befuddlement still clung to her. “You’re made out of chakra, though?”

Shukaku growled in mock anger- “and my lack of control despite that particular condition was the basis of many embittered complaints made by kid-Shukaku. My younger brothers-” he snapped his mouth shut.

“Younger brothers?”

Shukaku glared at her for a second before just… glaring skyward. Trust *those two* to ruin his mood even five hundred years after they died. “I don’t want to talk about them.” Now, or preferably, *ever* .

Tora nodded in sympathetic understanding. “Would you like to learn henge to take your mind off things?”

“You used that strategy on your *eight year old* daughter.”

A raised eyebrow and crossed arms was the response to that particular statement. “Well? *Do* you want to learn?”

“...yes.”

She smirked. “Thought so.”

Wind country faded to the land of rivers, then to fire- verdant greenery clambering over every surface, grasses sweeping up beside the roads. Trees grew like twisted monuments over ruins and roads, dappled shadow reaching out with its clawed hands as they ponderously trekked onwards. The air itself felt *moist* , laden with humidity he hadn’t felt for centuries- like standing on the edge of a storm- like the Ootsutsuki’s forest, before it had been razed to the ground.

Three days after they entered fire country the skies cracked open to thunder's spearing strike, cascades of water- endless shadows of shifting precipitation- crashing down over them in sheets. It soaked into his sand and rendered the earth beneath him leaden to his manipulations, but there was still something so marvelous *wonderful* in standing within nature's heart. The center of the storm, thunderous winds and sharp thunder- seeing a world anew, five centuries later.

Perhaps he should have wandered sooner, if this was how it was. The air tasted of petrichor for the next day, and the Sabaku shinobi were even *weaker* than they had been before- for all they tried to ambush them, they were remarkably bad at it. Really, a large concentration of chakra-rich sand was like a particularly bright beacon to him.

On the fifth day in fire country Shukaku stopped beside the rotten remnants of a mountainous root, long since collapsed to the forest floor. A thick layer of trees clung tenaciously to the top of its bark, gnarled roots delving into the deep layer of organic soil that spilled out over the edges of the once-majestic root.

He wondered what the others thought of these things, now so long passed to ancient memory- the work of gods, or some dead god? Forest spirits? All he could think of was the jutsu that'd made them, and how powerful it had reigned over the enemy. Wood release: binding of the Shinju. How painful it had been in the moment of his death.

He was quiet for the rest of the day, gaze focused far into the distance of memories. If Tora noticed- and surely she did, because she was observant like that- then she didn't comment on it.

Shukaku appreciated that.

When the first *competent* attack came, had it not been for the Tora's sensory ability they would have been caught completely by surprise. As it was, Tora's seal-etched kunai flickered into the bush they were

hiding in just moments before a barrage of shuriken sailed through the air towards them with furious speed. Shukaku reacted second, spikes of earth spearing up from the ground beneath the fleeing figures- and *missing* .

They didn't even dodge- the spikes just missed. He threw a few more attacks at them, watching only *one* of them hit- he wasn't sure how he'd managed such a remarkably low accuracy, that their assailants were *getting* away. It was as if they simply weren't where he saw them-

Genjutsu .

With a furious roar and a sweep of powerful killing intent he *shattered* the thin layer of chakra that had subtly crept over his own, as remarkable for its strength as its subtlety. "Genjutsu!"

Tora nodded in understanding- " *kai!* " Her chakra flickered fitfully, the delicate weave of chakra that had surrounded them both shuddering and collapsing inwards on itself at the second axis of disruption. "These aren't Sabaku nin."

Shukaku gritted his sand in understanding, a portion of his form flowing out to surround Okimi in a perfect shell, powerful barriers humming to life across its form. With the girl safe within his perfect defense he directed his attention back to the battle, catching one of the black haired shinobi on a rock-spear and gutting another with a blast of wind.

Competent did not even begin to describe how well the unit moved- each action fluid into the next, nary a weakness between their perfect motion. Their kenjutsu was impeccable- each blow slicing into his sand so powerfully, always exploiting the weaknesses between the scything blades of wind and piercing spikes, clearly superior to Tora's own. Her sand, at least, kept her safe from most of the more vicious attacks-

A *fireball* flew past his hand, furious heat only barely deflected by a wave of Tora's sand- the desperate move opening her up to a counterattack from the side. Shukaku grasped hold of the sand littering the ground around the descending blade and *reshaped*- lines to lines, smudges to swirling characters until a violet barrier sprung up just in time to block the sword's blow.

This was getting nowhere- scoffing, Shukaku pulled deeply at the earth, brining it into an immense wave that blotted out the sun above them. Subtlety was for losers who didn't have a bijuu's chakra reserves, anyways.

In the sudden shadow of earth, he could see them- bloodred like memory, terror and clawing- and *anger* - and suddenly their enemies' competence made a lot more sense. Scarlet, bloody red sharingan lit the darkness, tomoe revolving in furious loops- blurring in their intensity as they shunshined out of the way.

Shukaku slammed his eyes shut, grasping onto Tora with a tendril of sand and throwing her into behind his shield with Okimi. *Don't look them in the eyes* . He stared at their nin, maw opened wide- chakra swirling in endless rotation, five and one-

The original Ichibi had some weak air blast as his most powerful- excluding his bijuudama- technique. Shukaku neither wanted something like that nor had the depth of experience in jutsu creation to even *make* much beyond wind chakra controlled purely on the basis of practice and willpower. He *did* have a different technique, though- stolen from the future, taken to its logical extreme from the past.

Pure chakra manifested in front of his maw- like a bijuudama but *not* , five spinning orbs orbiting another within the center of a single overarching shell. " *Amenomihashira!* " There was a single second before the attack shot out, and then the forest around them was light, sound, and the stoic pain of dying Uchiha.

A minute after the explosions died down he unraveled the seals on his sand prison, revealing a slightly shaking Tora and a terrified Okimi who immediately bowled into him with a tight embrace. “The bad sand men got *badder!* And less sandy!”

He shared a grim look with Tora, whose half furious, half concerned expression revealed she knew *exactly* the significance of the attack. “Ah… Okimi, those were the… bad funny eyes men.” Indra would be rolling in his grave if he heard that, and Fugaku in his… many-greats grandmother’s sparkling eyes? The expression had already failed in translation, no need to break it even more.

Still, as Okimi nodded in solemn acceptance, he *knew* he was going to tell this to Kokuo, and the horse was going to die of laughter. Even Tora quirked a smile, some of the tension from the sudden combat relaxed at the absurdity of the statement. Still, it didn’t completely relax the focus in her eyes, the twitchy way she glanced at the shadows around them as if wondering if the Uchiha could survive one of the strongest attacks ever made.

Well, with Izanagi, they probably *could* have. “We need to leave, right now. The sharingan is… bad news.” Very bad news- the gentjutsu able to affect even *him* and his powerful resistance was clearly example enough for how dangerous it could be.

Tora nodded in determination, the half of her reaction that had been fear fading to resolve- for Okimi, if nothing else. Even as blood dripped slowly from the gashes along her side and the burn on the side of her face crinkled in a way that *must* have been painful, she swept Okimi up into her arms and bounded into the trees.

A tendril of sand swept in front of her and shattered into a web weaved in barrier seals, halting her forward momentum just as quickly as it’d started. She twirled in fury, only for Shukaku’s serious stare to bring her to a halt. “What? *You* were the one saying we needed to go.”

“No.” He looked pointedly over his shoulder, holding out a hand to the kunoichi. “You just assumed that leaving meant *running* .” He looked at her with a deep gaze, expectant, for a moment longer before sighing in exasperation. Some people just didn’t understand… “get on. We’re going *fast* .”

Tora’s eyes widened. “Are you sure? I… got the impression that you’d hate being *ridden* -”

“Well, you’re not riding me any more than Okimi was riding *you* just now.” He paused for a second- “unless you need something suitably impressive to brag about one day. Then you can say you rode the Ichibi.”

Okimi stared up at his towering form, wide eyes *sparkling* with earnest excitement. “You’re going to carry us? This is going to be so-so much *fun!* ” She cheered, squirming gently in Tora’s grasp to get at him quicker.

“On second thought…”

Her eyes widened even further in betrayed horror. “No! Quick mom! Go go-” Tora rolled her eyes and bounded up his arm, shooting him a thankful glance as Okimi jabbered on- the battle mere seconds ago all but forgotten.

They settled into the space between his ears, Tora crouched with carefully adhesive chakra, Okimi held firmly in place by Shukaku’s sand-

Then they were *running* , fire country blurring behind them like so many forgotten dreams and shattered trees- to Uzushio, with speed.

They cornered them at the coast, where the crashing waves met the end of the forest in misty breath, sandy beaches nestled between sea-slick stones. The air tasted of salt and charged chakra and a hint of determined desperation. They weren’t even trying to be subtle;

fifteen men in light battle armor, three of which were clearly an ino-shika-cho trio, chakra crackling in faint unease as he skidded to a stop in front of them.

He didn't have time for this- battle, or the pursuit he'd have to endure if continued past them. Killing intent blanketed the air; the strength of a bijuu, the distilled power that one night in Konoha's future had rendered thousands catatonic with fear, sharpened with an actual *target* and *intent.*

The Uchiha arrayed against him *knew* that he wanted to kill him- as surely as the sun rose, they knew they would die. "Get out of our way." His voice was like the crack of thunder, deep and so sharp- "you cannot possibly hope to stop us- I'll give you the chance to leave with your lives intact."

The lead Uchiha smirked- it was like Indra in his worst days, his emotions ever so slightly *wrong* . Arrogance instead of excitement- it seemed his ideology ran true even now. "We've been paid enough to fund the entire clan for *twenty years* for the successful capture of one you two." At least his robe- black and tasteful dark blue, Uchiha fan emblazoned on the back and gold thread stitched with careful hydrophobic barrier seals across its edges- was nice and suitably arrogant. "After all, a kekkei genkai which can control the Ichibi is *very valuable indeed.* "

Oh . He saw where they were coming from now- it even made sense, if he squinted, turned his head a bit, forgot sentience was a thing people could have, and adopted an arrogance to rival Indra's. Controlling him *would* be a good enough motive to hire what felt like the *entire Uchiha clan* to hunt them down.

"Very well then." He tried, and failed, to keep his mirth contained, but if his visible amusement seemed to intimidate them more than the full force of his killing intent, well… "lets dance." Sand exploded outwards in every direction from his form as the ninja flickered away, small blades curving away to follow the enemy nin under Tora's control as he focused on laying down a seal.

Five seconds. That was all the time it took for his sand to shift shape into well practiced characters, a three-layered barrier seal forming in his mind and impressing itself onto the world- and a pink barrier flared into existence, a perfect rectangle of chakra shooting up a thousand feet into the air. The sound of the Akimichi smashing into the sudden obstacle, and the muffled curses of the ino-shika, was music to his ears. The carefully ignored glares and soft, angry scoffs from the Uchiha even moreso.

They were trapped, and they knew it.

Fire release ninjutsu flared in tandem with a powerful wind-release, slamming against a wave of sand and melting it to slag and glass. It was a good enough strategy- sand release relied on the mobility of the earth particles, flowing smoothly with wind chakra- and it probably would have worked on almost any other sand user- but Shukaku was no ordinary *shinobi* .

He was the Ichibi, and in five centuries of experience with increasingly fine control exercises was a supreme mastery over his element. A flex of earth chakra- twisting inwards on itself like a rasengan, propagated throughout the entire glass sculpture like a sealing network- shattered it to a fine dust which neatly separated in two to crash down against the two Uchiha.

Then it exploded, because explosive seals were the best thing, and as he saw the two shinobi disappear in a flurry of sharp glass and blood, he couldn’t have been more proud of himself for inventing them.

Two more Uchiha fell beneath Tora’s blade and the powerful explosive seals he’d etched onto her kunai before the enemy managed to regroup and start recovering. A chakra-empowered kick to his side- from the fancy-robed man- was forceful enough to actually stagger him a bit, and it was enough for the Nara to grab his shadow for a single moment and force him to look into the Yamanaka’s eyes.

Big mistake .

He could *feel* the woman's soul yank at his own in an attempt to replace it- but she tried to pull at a soul that spanned the universe, an immortal law written into the nature of chakra, and something there didn't compute. To make a long story short, her brain turned to liquid, and Shukaku barely even stumbled at the assault. There were probably other Yamanaka jutsu that would have worked better, but… well, he'd take the free victory.

His tail crashed down on the staggered Nara, smashing him into the bedrock alongside the two Uchiha shinobi who thought a collaborative barrier jutsu would be enough against several tons of sand moving faster than terminal velocity. With his chakra mostly free for a single moment he let it swirl in the eddying complexity of an amenomihashira, its brilliant intensity hanging in the air between *him* and *them* .

He almost laughed as fancy-robe Uchiha threw a wave of blazing black Amaterasu towards him- amenomihashira had been built *specifically* to counter far more powerful versions of that technique, and the five interior spheres ripped through the startled Uchiha forces in a spray of blood and sojourning bones who, for some reason, decided the open air was a nice place to be this time of year. " *Die!* Amenomihashira!" Another brilliant blue sphere smashed into where fancy-robe was standing, tearing the last remaining Uchiha by his side limb from limb even as he barely dodged.

"You've made an enemy of the Uchiha clan for this, woman!" Well, at least they didn't hold it against Shukaku personally. He'd hate to get on the wrong side of the funny eye men. Fancy-robe barely dodged out of the blast radius of a seal before sliding neatly into a chain shunshins, flickering between the treetops as Shukaku slowly marched seals in intricate lines of sand across every surface.

Speed was *annoying,* he decided, when he couldn't just bijuudama the whole area and be done with it. Trapped in his barrier as he was, he'd eventually make a mistake- and then they'd be free.

It happened, four and a half minutes into his mad sprint- he stepped on an explosive seal and shunshined out of the way with admirable- but not quick enough to avoid a painful burn scorched onto his leg. Desperation and *anger* wrote themselves deeply in the lines around his eyes, chakra burning with fear and *anger* - a cornered animal, claws shining sharp beneath the impossibility of his escape.

It was just enough to make him do something stupid- his eyes gravitated to the only surface that didn't have seals written across it in spiraling, delicate script- *Shukaku* . To the rational mind, it wouldn't have even been an option- Shukaku could *clearly* manipulate his sand with incredible precision, and his back *was his sand* . He didn't even have to *move* it- all he had to do was make a seal.

To a desperate Uchiha on the verge of death, all other options exhausted, it looked like paradise.

Opportunity.

With a burst of smoke he shunshined off the tree he'd retreated to, little more than a faint blur in the air as he jumped onto Shukaku's back and raced up towards where Okimi had been watching the battle with horrified attention- the fullness of his chakra burning bright for just that small iota of extra *speed* -

Three steps, three small shunshins, and he'd crossed the entirety of Shukaku's back, arms outreached in malicious glee- just for an explosive seal to trigger beneath him, blasting his legs to pulp and shards of bone as his torso skidded to a stop mere feet in front of Okimi.

He looked down the bijuu's immense eye below, grinning madly, chakra seething in pain and terror- in *victory* . "You… are a fool, to oppose the Uchiha clan heir." Blood dribbled from his mouth as he laughed, insane and so deadly sure- "the Uchiha… love, *hate* beyond death. *Izanagi!* "

The very air seemed to split- like killing intent but *more* , the ultimate genjutsu distorting reality as a dream asserted its righteous sovereignty over existence itself. A single action- erased, rewritten in all its myriad possibility- a wish made manifest. In one reality fancy-robes had been blasted to pieces by an explosive seal- and in another, he wrapped his arms around Okimi and shunshined a hundred feet to the ground in a single moment.

A kunai pressed roughly to the frozen girl's stomach, hard enough to draw blood. "Tell your dog to *heel* , woman, or else… the Sabaku only need one of you." Tora shot Shukaku a desperate, pleading look, but he was already settling uneasily onto the ground, tail wrapped around his hands. "Good. Good- if I so much as see a grain of sand *twitch* , then I'm sure your little six your old would love the taste of a *real* explosive seal."

"I'm eight…"

"Shut up brat!" She shut up. "Now- instruct the beast carefully- tell it to look into my eyes." Shukaku's sand stilled in horrified shock.

A choice.

Freedom in the eyes of another, or dominion for a life.

He loved Okimi… but it was really no choice at all. Clearly Tora recognized it too- letting the Uchiha trap him in a mangekyou genjutsu was as good as handing him a bag of bijuudama and telling him to go wild.

Neither of them would survive that.

Shukaku slowly began to stitch the smallest, most subtle explosive he could seal on fancy-robe's neck, each grain of sand moving so very subtly as they pressed themselves together. The show he made of resisting Tora's control all the while was probably… not very convincing.

“You have ten seconds before she starts losing fingers, *woman* . Ten-” Shukaku strained to keep his killing intent in- he just needed a *bit more time!* “Nine.” He scraped at the very depths of his chakra control, pulling a hundred grains of sand at a time, in unique patterns- “eight.” Fancy-robes positioned her hand above her heart- an assurance and a warning, and a punishment- “seven.” Fifteen seconds! For the first time in decades, he cursed insufficient chakra control. “Six-”

An instant passed- less than a second for Tora to flick through the hand seals for the body replacement, and in a puff of smoke a shell-shocked Okimi collapsed to the ground where moments before Tora had been standing in terrified determination.

It happened too fast for him to do *anything* , and it was in moments like this his old inferiority complex reared his head with a vengeance. He’d been right when he’d thought these two were walking trauma triggers- Tora appeared where Okimi had been standing, body already blurring with a samurai’s speed as she stabbed her sword through his remaining sharingan-

And fancy-robe’s kunai dragged a line from shoulder to hip, gutting her open.

“ *Mom!* ” Shukaku restrained Okimi from jumping to her death with a hasty sand coffin, but he himself was already skidding to a stop beside the dying woman. She wasn’t supposed to die. She was supposed to *live*- in Uzushio, where she and her daughter would have been *safe* . Idotic Uchiha…

“Hey…” her voice was weak, but somehow still bright- unshed tears prickling at the edges of her eyes. “It’s not your fault… that the Uchiha are bastards.” Yeah. They really were. “Take… take good care of Okimi for me? She… she really likes you. You’ll be good for her…”

Shukaku shook his head wildly- that would be *giving up* . “No- no- I’ve only raised two children in my life, and both of them tried to kill

me- I'll be *terrible* ."

Tora laughed, but it came out more as a choking gurgle. "I… believe in yourself… don't think I've ever met someone so powerful with so little self-confidence…" her smile grew fixed, breathing labored. "Hey… has the sun ever seemed so bright… the earth so green… the ocean… glittering sunset running. Love you, Okimi. Love you, love you… love…"

"No. *No.* I *don't allow it* !" He pulled at the depths of memories from a time before, pulled at the depths of his chakra as he gently lifted her off the ground, sand scouring the earth for all that'd been lost. "You *will not die* !" Slowly, he stepped out onto the water and started to *run* . "Please- please, just hold on. For Okimi." The body gave no response.

Sand whirled around her in ever-dizzying patterns, seals forming and fading as fast as he could think- anything, everything to keep her alive just a moment longer. A thousand small, flexible barriers, holding her steady and patching the myriad holes in her gut, a seal to bind her blood to her body, a modified wind-release exploding tag with a cyclical dampening matrix to smooth out the chakra flow, two peaks in line with with the beating of her heart.

It *was* the beating of her heart.

Waves crashed beneath his feet as he hurtled over the ocean to Uzushiogakure, each loping step of his sprint casting explosions of spray into the cloudy ocean air. He couldn't be bothered to hide his presence- as though anyone would see him on the open sea- instead focusing his entire attention onto the elaborate seal network plastered over her body.

A seal to cycle the bypass the ruined, flooded alveoli in the lungs, an oxygen-permeable barrier and chakra-release seal keyed to her chakra network, to keep everything moving.

Reinforcing seals across the broken ribs, binding them together.

Chakra storage seals inscribed across her chakra network, to bridge the gaps where intense trauma had torn the pathways asunder. Still no matter how much he wrote, there were still things he couldn't solve- he had no ability to disinfect the wounds, nor the lightning-release seals he'd need to fix the frankly bewildering damage to her nervous system. There was only so much his limited sensing ability could help him with, and he couldn't help but feel as though her life was slipping through his fingers.

Onwards, he ran- the sheer *speed* of his enhanced sprint bleeding a faint haze of golden-brown chaka into the air, a *pressure* that sent the wildlife around him fleeing against the Juubi's toxic influence.

The first sign he was approaching Uzushiokagure was the immense sealing barrier that rose from the waves, shimmering iridescent in the dying sunlight. Even at the speed he was going it was almost laughably easy to bypass- sand slammed out against it, flickering into a faint few characters that matched the barrier's frequency and short-circuited the released chakra before it could reach the receptors and manifest a barrier.

The second and third barriers were much the same, if progressively more powerful and complex. The fourth was inspired- a bastardized cyclical release seal that ever so slightly changed the chakra's frequency as it looped through the barrier. It could do with some variability, but were he not so rushed he'd marvel over its austere efficacy.

Uzushiokagure loomed over the horizon, a colorful speck on the ocean tucked behind a scintillating red barrier. Shukaku spared the thought to twist his chakra *this way* , then *that* , and finally *there*- just like how Tora had shown him, willing with all his terrible desire to *make her live* .

A simple henge into a normal, if gigantic, tanuki had nothing against his sheer desire to *keep Tora alive* .

If the fourth barrier had been inspired, the fifth was awe inspiring- a mad mishmash of uncountable techniques that somehow only reinforce each other, flowing together with no rhyme or reason to create a powerful whole. The sheer randomness of its movement meant the basic bypass technique he'd been using wouldn't work- if he had a few minutes, he probably could have found a weak point between the components- but he didn't *have* a few minutes.

Well, bijuudama was the bijuu's solution to everything.

As they barrier flickered and collapsed under the strain of *two*- small- bijuudama and vaporized seawater splashed down over the city he leapt across the sentinel sealing spires which had anchored the main barrier, over the past few hundred feet to the island itself, and skidded to a stop in front of a regiment of shockingly colorful shinobi.

The leader was pointing a *trident* at him, and in his exhausted state the only thing he could think of was- whoa. Absolutely awesome. "...hurt shinobi." He gulped in a- wholly unnecessary- breath, letting his chakra settle from the long run. "We were seeking refuge in Uzushio from wind country nin, and were attacked by Uchiha shinobi at the coast. Tora was critically wounded." Gently- so very gently- he levitated her to the beach on a platform of sand. "Please, *please* heal her. And… uh, sorry for breaking your barrier."

The lead Uzumaki glanced to where Okimi sat tearfully on his back, then leaned on her trident looking throughly disgruntled. "Fine." Two shinobi shunshined out from behind the front lines, hands glowing the aquamarine of primitive medical chakra. "I don't get how you got through the main barrier." Her voice was a low grumble, but still clear enough that it was obvious she *wanted* her griping to be heard. "It's supposed to be strong enough to stand against a rampaging *bijuu* ."

No, thought Shukaku in giddy, wry humor. It really isn't.

One of the doctors flicked through hand-seals for some sort of medical jutsu, seals on her arms lighting up brilliant blue as she pressed her palms against Tora's chest. A long second passed as

her eyes grew progressively wider and wider. “ *Kami* - who the *hell* made these seals? She should have died *hours* ago!”

The trident-kunoichi snapped to attention, kicking a few shinobi out of the way as she knelt down beside Tora. “Move over, brat- let me see-” chakra flared around her hands, her own set of seals flickering pale blue across her arms. “Get your chakra out of the way! No, the diagnosis, keep healing idiot! I’m… woah. Those are some seriously complicated seals… three dimensional matrices? *Sand* ? How long did these take?”

Minutes for the major ones. Hours for the entire life-support network. “Months of careful preparation,” he lied.

Trident-kunoichi- he was seriously beginning to suspect she was the clan head- narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t know the tanuki summons were so good at sealing.”

“Yeah. That’s… we’re underestimated sometimes.” Well, if she fell for his cover without him even needing to say it, then all the better for him.

She scoffed, leaning away from Tora’s still, unconscious, *breathing* body. “Well, I’m no medic-”

“Then, with all due respect Ayaka-sama, *shut up* .” The second doctor met trident-kunoichi’s- Ayaka’s- scathing glare with a furious disinterest that screamed of long, long practice. “She’ll live, most likely. No promises if she’ll ever walk again, and she *definitely* won’t be an active shinobi. Any strenuous chakra usage will probably snap the seals holding her chakra network together-” the expression on her face that said she was absolutely done with the random impossibility of that particular fact- “and snap her chakra network with the rebound in turn. Intensive care, for her.” A shinobi stepped forward, only to be whacked over the head and chastised to be *careful this time* as he knelt down to take her to the hospital.

She’d live.

She’d *live.* It was enough- for once, outside fate- just once he hadn’t failed someone. Damaged, wounded- but she’d live.

They’d made it to sanctuary at Uzushio. He couldn’t help but relax in exhaustion, sweeping Okimi into the embrace she desperately needed after the last few traumatic hours. They’d made it. They’d *made it-* to refuge. To safety- and despite his exhaustion he could only beam at the swirling, cloudy sky in giddy happiness.

Ayaka spun away from the doctor-shinobi duo as they absconded with Tora, turning to Shukaku with a saccharine smile plastered over her face- the sort of grin to inspire true dread amongst those who saw it. She cracked her knuckles, and leant nonchalantly against her trident- a master of Uzumaki brusque intimidation, really. “So, say, sir tanuki boss summon… I was wondering a bit about those *very valuable* wards you blew up on the way in…”

Shukaku whimpered.

So... I swear this chapter was going to be shorter, but the action really got away from me. You'll have to wait on Shukaku's stay in Uzushiogakure for next chapter...

Amenomihashira is Asura's signature attack from the sage's era, and as a lot of people were asking if he'd keep some of the super-powerful attacks, here you go. Most of the others were either too kekkei genkai related (Indra's Susanoo, Amaterasu), a chakra nature he didn't have access to (wood release: binding of the shinju, sage art wood release: true several thousand hands), or required too much control for him to use at the time (body replacement), but as a reincarnation he knows how to do rasengan from the series so it's not too hard to imagine he could extrapolate backwards to amenomihashira.

Also, we got to see his sealwork- he might have only delved into barriers, explosive tags and chakra storage, but he's well and proved

that with enough creativity, and a few hundred years to really advance their use, he can do some pretty crazy stuff.

Sealing Fate

Chapter 10: Sealing Fate

That hadn't… exactly been what he'd expected, but the Uzumaki had always been a bit insane.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

To their credit, thought Shukaku as a particularly old Uzumaki stared at him from across the seaside cave he'd conquered for himself, they'd at least waited for Tora to wake up before virtually punting this grandma at him. Her gaze was pretty piercing… she'd do well in interrogation, probably.

Or, what counted for interrogation amongst the Uzumaki. "So. Shukaku!" She clapped her hands together, and Shukaku didn't take the sparks of blue that traveled through her seals as anything less than a threat. "I have a question for you- who are you, really?"

"Ah, funny you ask that… I'm the boss summon of the-"

"No. No you're not." She leveled him a glare more intimidating than the clan head's. "You see, I have a… unique information source that's been able to reveal to me that you're lying. They're very perceptive- it really took a lot for them to figure it out." She flicked through a set of hand seals before slamming a palm onto the floor. "Summoning jutsu!" The fading smoke revealed more or less exactly what he'd been expecting-

A pair of small tanuki looked at him with barely constrained curiosity, and Shukaku knew his luck *had* to run out sometime. The smaller of the pair padded up to him and pressed her hand into his henged fur, face scrunching up in distaste as she lightly pawed at the sensation.

“You need to wash. Also, you’re too big if you’re pretending to be Chairo-sama. He’s like-” she shakily balanced on her hind legs, throwing her paws wide- “that big, you know?” Shukaku did not, in fact, know.

“Drop the henge, brat.”

“Hey! I’m older than you.” A raised eye was the only answer to that statement. “Fine.” He just *let go* of the warped chakra that’d been folding his form into its current unnatural state.

He had to say, the look of shock on the elderly Uzumaki’s face as the Ichibi appeared in front of her in a poof of sand was so, *so* satisfying. Still, she recovered remarkably well from the sudden appearance of a tailed beast in front of her.

The tanuki duo… not so much. The smaller one just pawed at his sand again, face wrinkling further. “Your fur is gone. Fur loss can be a big problem! I just-” she was cut off with a yelp as the larger of the two grabbed her by the scruff and threw her back. “Hey!”

“The big tanuki turned into a *bigger sand tanuki* . Its chakra’s scary!”

“Well, I was talking about fur care! You know how important that is- and he just lost his-”

“He’s made of *sand*- ”

Shukaku just glanced to the elderly woman, who’d pinched the bridge of her nose in exasperation from the start of the conversation. “I’m not sure if I ever expected to agree with a bijuu on something, but… if it had to be anything, it would be how annoying the duo are.”

“We’re not annoying!”

The elder brother nodded resolutely. “Yeah!”

“Go home, brats.” A soft sigh of relief was the only sound in the bar the ceaseless lapping of seawater in the moment after two small

puffs of smoke erupted around the two, their forms dragged back to the tanuki's realm. "So… bijuu. Of all the things that I was expecting, that wasn't one. Especially not *wind* country's bijuu. Answer me truthfully- why did you come to Uzushiogakure?"

"You *know* that." He could see it in her eyes- the slight guilt that showed she *understood* , even if she refused to truly believe it. "I came here for Okimi's sake. My brother recommended Uzushiogakure as a good location to bring them."

"Brother as…"

"The Hachibi."

"Right." There- he hadn't known there was a patented *Uzumaki* I'm-so-done-with-this expression, but between the woman in front of him and the doctor from before, he was starting to see a pattern- "as in, the same Hachibi that teamed up with the Nibi to beat the Kyuubi into the ground and destroy half the land of noodles? By that matter, how did you get through the first four barriers? They're not broken like the fifth."

Shukaku gave her a long-suffering *look* . As if there was *another* Hachibi… the elder at least had the decency to look a little bit embarrassed. "Sealing, obviously. So far, by my standards, Uzumaki sealing is ridiculous backwards."

The elder practically *bristled* at the insinuation their seals were anything less than cutting edge, a faint tinge of *actual killing intent* flickering into the space between them for a single moment before disappearing as fast as it came. "You're a brat, you know? Here's a bet, then-" she looked at him, so incredibly smugly- "rebuild the fifth barrier in a month. If it's stronger than before, then I'll teach you uzumaki script. I'll even keep your… nature… a secret. But if it's *worse* , then you have to tell me *exactly* how you got through the barriers, and how you made those medical seals." A supreme confidence positively dripped off her form- as if she couldn't imagine

a universe in which a foreign sealp-master could possibly complete such a task.

Shukaku just grinned, suspicions of ancestral genealogies for one Senju Tsunade flickering in the back of his mind.

Two weeks later, a gaping elder Akane stood beside an equally incredulous Ayaka as their strongest attacks slid off a brilliant garnet barrier with neither a ripple nor crack marring its perfect form. It shone like a perfect sheet of perfect glass, its faint glow casting an eerily uniform light across the entire city, its many colorful buildings strangely uniform in the harshness of the light.

An immense tidal wave washed against the shield, eliciting nothing more than a faint increase in its scarlet luminescence. “This- *no* . I refuse to believe that some *brat* managed to make a seal better than the *grand barrier* in under a month.” The elder, Akane, screeched in half-hearted, weary frustration before summoning her chakra again- very, *very* dense chakra- slamming it down onto the barrier in the shape of four *massive* golden chains.

To almost any other seal the shattering techniques she’d imbued into the golden links would have torn it asunder in a single hit, disrupting the internal chakra pathways and cascading a failure along the entire network. *This* seal, though, had been carefully made with as many layers of security as he could possibly fit into it.

Two weeks was a truly long amount of time to give to someone who could have replaced their original barrier with one just as strong in two and half hours, maximum.

A dense web of tripwire barriers flickered into visibility for a second as the chains broke through them- nonexistent to normal ninjustu, but *just* present enough to fuuinjutsu for a brute force technique to snap them like fine glass.

Fire erupted beneath the chains, brilliant white and searingly even from their distance over the whirlpool-ridden sea. Akane began to sweat as her chakra *sharpened* , pushing just a *little* closer to the seal under the pure force of her willpower. Three seconds, four- then the chains shattered into glittering dust and she collapsed, Ayaka just barely catching Akane before she could fall into the crashing waves beneath them. When the trident-wielding kunoichi looked up at him, it was with a look of excited, inquisitive *awe* .

Really, the idea behind the technique wasn't even complicated- if something designed specifically to break seals was flying at a seal, just *don't let it get there* . No advanced defenses required.

Three hours later, when Akane crawled out of unconsciousness by dint of sheer grit to a city bathed in natural moonlight and seal distinctly missing, the first thing she asked was whether she'd managed to destroy it.

Shukaku gave Okimi a pat on the head and the honorable sacrifice of telling her she hadn't.

They stood on a small sandbar far beyond the first sealing barrier, cerulean ocean blue lapping in every direction, forever- an eternity of water, glittering against the noonday sun. Far beneath the waves the faintest flickers of color reflected off chaotic waters, flashes of coral and darting fish dipping into the ancient bones of the earth beneath them.

The wind was the sky around them, and the sky was free.

Akane stood still on the small lone patch of sparse grass, neatly cut battle-robes fluttering behind her in the ocean breeze- a spot of vibrant color amidst the eternities of blue and sandy brown. "To know Uzumaki sealing is to know the history of the clan; to know the history of the clan is to know Uzumaki sealing." Her voice was solemn- weary almost, though against her usual personality he could certainly see how the formality grated. "In remembering our past, we

chart our future as did our ancestors through the maelstrom around the isle; in knowing our futures we seal our destines. How much do you know about uzumaki history?”

A bird circled above them with a lonely cry, white plumage indistinct against the cloud speckled sky. A fish darted up to where he lay in the water- larger than the sandbar itself- before fliting away, to the unknowable circle of existence ever looping. “Not much.” That was a lie-

Akane just nodded with solemn acceptance. “I expected as much. So, the legends are like this- listen closely, cause’ I’m not going to repeat them, brat! So, in the far past, the Sage of Six Paths had two children. The first, conceited and cruel, gave rise to the Uchiha and their cursed eyes. The second, fair and magnanimous, gave rise to the Senju, and later, the Uzumaki clans.”

Shukaku ducked his head beneath the waves to keep from laughing. It was just so *hard* to imagine *Asura* as *calm and magnanimous* - he wasn’t collected even when he killed him. Indra… well, Zetsu’s manipulations *had* turned him cruel indeed.

A thick chakra chain whacked him on the head before yanking it out of the water. “Are you paying attention, brat? Hey, this manhandling bijuu thing is kind of fun, isn’t it?”

Shukaku opened his mouth to protest, thought back to the many times he’d beat Kokuo into the ground and gotten slammed around in turn, and decided not to comment.

“Eh, so as I was saying before you decided to teach yourself water ninjutsu, there’s these two kid demigods, get in a spat cause’ one of them’s evil, huge war and now the Senju and Uchiha hate each other. Around this point in time, Senju Arashi got into a disagreement with the rest of his clan upon the death of his father; he demanded the clan continue onto peace, while the rest of the Senju sought war. As the legend goes, Arashi took his sister and the few of the clan

who still sought a simple life and sailed the open seas until they found Uzushio, upon which they founded Uzushiogakure."

That made a… surprisingly large amount of sense. The few rare Senju he'd had the misfortune of running across had been more or less normal- extremely advanced, and their consistent earth and water releases spoke of at least *some* of Asura's legacy, but it was nothing compared to the sheer random *power* of the sharingan. The copy wheel eye that allowed a single clan and their scant allies to beat the Senju time and time again until their immense war was but a simmering feud.

The Uzumaki were the ones with his father's bloodline. "...and Arashi settled on the coast, and I'm going to whack you with my chain." She then proceeded to whack him with her chain, which was surprisingly painful as it rattled over his head. "Clearly this isn't interesting to you-"

He rapidly shook his head, perhaps in subconscious fear of another chain strike, but mostly at missing out on such a fascinating history. A fair bit of things made a *lot* more sense, considering.

Akane grumbled something incoherent, rolling her eyes and letting her chain rattle back into her chakra network. "Well, that's already everything really important. Eh… we were neutral before the empire fell- a gang of samurai can beat up a shinobi clan, but no amount of samurai could batter down our seals. They just had to suck it up and let us do our own thing." She clapped her hands together excitedly, a truly excessive aura of excitement bubbling up from her chakra. "Now, the *real* reason I took you out to this random island- seals!"

If his work with the Uzumaki barriers had given him a poor preconception of the famed Uzumaki sealing, then the first time Akane teleported an entire reef on top of his head disabused him thoroughly of the notion. The various other eclectic techniques that somehow, impossibly, built together to make a cohesive sealing form spoke of a truly innovative clan that wasn't afraid to jump into the

hardest, most indecipherable parts of the parent storage seal and eagerly rip logic to shreds.

He shuddered to think of how many times the island must have been exploded. There were few times he was more thankful for his past life's knowledge than when he watched a laughing ball of insanity show him seals to affect the *soul* , held together with spit, inconsistent nomenclature, and delicately applied *killing intent* of all things.

Still, there was just *much* there- he'd forgotten just how *fun* it was to speak seals with people who had unique perspectives on the art.

Time passed quickly, and yet- so very slowly. Each happy moment felt like it could last forever, yet always ended too fast-

Uzushiogakure was a pleasant place to call home.

Ten year old Okimi hadn't given up on the tanuki ears. By popular Uzumaki consensus- something quite difficult to get in the chaotic, ever-vibrant, *alive* city, it was adorable, which was probably half the reason she'd stuck to it. Nevertheless, her henge was incredibly good- Akane's summons had helped her get it down to the exact detail- more an art than anything else.

Shukaku had to agree. As Okimi kicked at the sand on the beach, ears flattened against her head and grumbling something incoherent about how she was supposed to have been meeting up with some friend or another later in the day, *cute* was probably how he'd describe it.

Akane stood of to the side, gruff as always, looking as though she was seconds away from whacking the *both* of them with her chains. "Okimi. You're going to learn *sealing* . That's important."

"Don't wanna. Can I learn the fishing game with my friends first?" A faint twitch fluttered across Akane's jaw, prime warning that if

Shukaku wanted her unnamed- “ *ow!* That’s no fair- I don’t have cool shiny chains and stuff! And you broke the henge!” Ah. Well, the bridge of *peaceful training sessions* had already been left behind and ignored. Or burnt, depending on Akane’s mood.

“ *Brat* . You’re here to learn Shukaku’s sealing style.” The interested glint in her eyes pretty clearly said that *Akane* was here to learn Shukaku’s sealing style, and had only just barely consented for him to teach it to Okimi first.

Okimi blinked, then looked at him with a grin that could outshine the sun. “Why didn’t you *say* so old woman! This is going to be *awesome* . Can you-” babbling again. Then the chain. He could already see a pattern in how these interactions were going to go.

Ponderously he raised an immense paw, shadow a pointed reminder for silence. “Sealing is a complicated science, Okimi, and one that demands absolute attention to detail unless you’ve developed a hidden desire to be exploded.”

“Um. No. I’d rather not.”

“Good. Then listen to Akane when she’s teaching you. But listen to me more, because I’m right and she’s not.” He couldn’t resist throwing a snide glance to the elder, who stuck out her tongue at him in petulant anger. “I use seals differently from the Uzumaki. Their technique involves tattooing a specific seal onto their skin, then applying that seal with inkless chakra to most any surface.” A tendril of sand dripped off the palm of his hand in shadow, writhing- “I, on the other hand, use sand manipulation to make *any* seal in sand.” The chakra froze in a shape of eddying characters and rippling lines, flickering the ruddy golden brown of his chakra for a single second before it began to glow with a brilliant white light.

Okimi’s positively bounced up and down in excitement, eyes sparkling brightly. “Whoa. Can you teach me that?”

Shukaku nodded, so faintly smiling. “Your kekkei genkai is sand release, so yes- I can.” He lifted an orb of sand from the beach, carefully pulling out the silicates and depositing them into Okimi’s hand. “Let me go through a few exercises I used when I was building control…”

Two years later Okimi made her first seal in sand- an exploding tag that actually managed to explode when she wanted it to- and Akane was ecstatic enough at her progress to throw her a small party on the beach. Even Tora, weak as she still was, managed to get someone to carry her down from the infirmary.

Shukaku attended, too- henged into his tanuki-form, settled just offshore in the swirling waters and just… enjoying the atmosphere, the inane chatter and petty, pointless arguments that wouldn’t ever have an impact on their relationships.

He hadn’t been to a party like this since before his father died.

The burning sun and seaside cool, the tug of water, the faint hum of powerful chakra drifting through the air, unworried, *excited* … Tora and Okimi, standing together as the younger struggled to make a seal with her henge on…

So many little moments. Peaceful moments, here so far from the violent tumult of the continent.

It felt like freedom.

It was what he was fighting for.

“The three skies formation interconnects with Kei’s fourth fundamental to smooth the chakra flow and extend the opening of the dimensional storage such that it can be safely traversed without a powerful barrier…”

Shukaku resisted the urge to groan. How the Uzumaki managed to do anything with their seals, he didn't think he'd ever know. " *Draw them out* , please. I need to see the thought process."

Akane rolled her eyes, but complied nonetheless, sketching out a cyclical chakra dampening matrix and a collection of some interior symbols that related- somehow- to spacetime. "There. Recognize these now?"

He nodded his head slightly. "I use the first fairly extensively in my barriers to moderate chakra flow. The second… not so much." He sketched them out in sand, trying to piece together just where they'd been ripped out from the progenitor seal. "They're… part of the actual sealing matrix… where the chakra is most active when material is actively being transported in and out of the seal?"

"What'd you call them, then?"

"The first would be a cyclical chakra dampening matrix. The second would probably be a… space-time set? I'm not entirely sure what to call these Uzumaki not-quite matrices that include multiple characters. Components?"

Akane was silent for a long moment, frown sharp enough to chisel mountains. "...I'll admit, brat, that maybe your sealing script has at least *one* thing better than uzumaki script. For all its ridiculous limitations, it certainly calls things how it is." Yes, it did, and logical consistency went a long way to explaining seals comprehensively.

Wary of the chain, Shukaku didn't dare voice that thought aloud. "The main difference between our styles is method. I've remained fairly organized in my extrapolation, as opposed to the Uzumaki…"

"Glorious chaos? Magnificent madness?" Akane cackled as her chains carefully began to draw out all the myriad space-time symbols they knew. "I just say it how it is." It was more than that, really- the vast majority of the time he spent with fuuinjutsu was ensuring that everything he knew was logically consistent with the overarching

theory of it all. Knowing the theory behind sealwork was half the reason his barriers were as strong as they were.

Then Akane started channeling chakra into the seals on the sand, things started exploding, and his musing on the differences between his sealing and the Uzumaki's was cut rather abruptly short.

When Okimi turned sixteen Ayaka took her to the highest spire of Uzushio, alone, and when she came back two and half days later- clothes ragged, dripping wet, and grinning with unhidable glee, she wore the name Uzumaki Okimi with pride.

Shukaku took her aside to his and Akane's broken isle, past the beached reefs, craters and shards of glass, and began to teach her the mathematical basis behind the mysticism that was sealing.

When she turned twenty, his first original space-time seal was scribed down onto a scroll and committed to the archives under Uzumaki Akane's name. To his infinite chagrin, he'd been forced to use the random, nonsensical uzumaki sealing patterns to get the aperture to stabilize for long enough. Clearly his theory needed some work before it could account for the sheer randomness that was space-time sealing.

Just after Okimi's twenty-first birthday, he learnt that if the random rules of space-time sealing were nonsensical and frustrating, there probably weren't even words strong enough to describe how much worse it was with seals that affected the soul. A mix of intent, endless chains of truly random operations, and seal characters that were completely unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

Akane just laughed and laughed at his endlessly bitter complaints.

When Okimi was twenty-five, she was married to a particularly gregarious Uzumaki sealmaster beneath the springtime scent of blossoms and salty wind- and a memory he'd never forget was how

content they'd both looked as they inked a shared seal onto each other's back.

Later that year, elder Akane passed away peacefully after a particularly trying sickness, and Shukaku was reminded of just how *mortal* his happiness could be.

Sunshine washed against faded sky-blue paint, cerulean accents just *barely* standing out against the paint they'd once domineered over- faint patterns of seals, beautiful in their complexity, in their simplicity. The crashing of the waves was a never-ending lullaby, fathomless depths brought to an end- just one of many… here, where the sea met the land of a small isle. Where the sea birds called out in their cheerful manner, and the flowers ever bloomed.

It was a truly beautiful day. Curled up with a gently sobbing Okimi outside a house that had once been Akane's, he thought it shouldn't- a nice thunderstorm would have been more thematically appropriate. They weren't even that rare when it came to Uzushiogakure- the span of lightning, a crashing thunder…

"It's so pretty… the sunshine. She'd have loved it."

Shukaku chuckled softly, trying to imagine Akane enjoying anything instead of good-naturedly tormenting him and his sealing. "I think… she'd have tried to hit the sun with her chainst and tell it to stop being so bright."

Okimi laughed brightly, the melancholic smile on her face so at odds to the tears just moments before. "She totally would." A flicker of chakra pressed out against his, just a curl, and Shukaku responded in kind… his acrid chakra caused her to flinch, but as their respective henges dissolved beneath each other's sunshine, she still smiled. "I think she really liked you, even if you never said it." It wasn't a lie. Lying to him would have been next to impossible during the chakra transfer ninshu.

“She gave me something a few months ago, for you.” She’d long suspected when she was going to die. When even the Uzumaki longevity started to fail, it wasn’t hard to suspect the end was soon. “She said-” he paused, composing himself for a single second- “the brat will love them. Brat.”

She whacked him lightly as a substitute for pushing him into the water- mostly because he already *was* in the water. The small, distant island would barely hold one of his paws, including the space the house was sitting on. “Weren’t *you* brat number one? I was the angelic and lovable Okimi, remember?”

Shukaku rolled his eyes, ruffling her hair in return. She’d really grown to hate that, with how it broke the henge, but today she just leaned into the soft, sandy tough. “Really? Well, if you don’t want it…”

“No! No, please?” She looked up at him with imploring eyes, and Shukaku couldn’t help but laugh. She looked so much like she had when she’d been ten, always asking for something or another… the sand of his hand shifted in soft agitation as he slowly pulled a glassy stone box almost as tall as Okimi from within it. “What is that?”

“A box. Or a block of stone-” Okimi leveled him a *look* , and he relented, shattering the stone to sand and pulling out a similarly large scroll. “Her tanuki summons. She thinks you should have them.”

Her eyes widened in shock as she leapt to her feet, throwing herself at him with a beaming smile, arms outstretched as she clung to him in her limpet-like embrace. “Thanks- thank you, I’m… I wish I could tell her how much this means… thanks, dad-”

Shukaku froze, chakra roiling in shock and confusion for a single, eternal moment before he forced himself to relax. “I… I think I like the sound of that.”

The next time they spoke, Tora just smirked and told him how surprised she was it took so long.

Eventually Ayaka's son took over as clan head, allowing her to retire. A retirement into the position of elder, which well… wasn't really much of a retirement, if Shukaku's knowledge of just how many people had come specifically to bother Akane was indicative of the position's usual troubles. As he'd more or less suspected, less than a month later she threw her trident at one of the warriors, packed everything into a seal, and moved out to Akane's old island.

To most of the Uzumaki, that was essentially the end of it- they'd asked questions, she'd reacted in a predictably Uzumaki manner, and now only the people who actually needed their problems solved would go and pick on the poor old woman.

In Shukaku's case, however, the former clan head was *convinced* something was off about him- perhaps it was because he was pretending to be the boss tanuki, yet had been living full time in Uzushiogakure for years. Or maybe one of the many, *many* inconsistencies around the stories of his past and where he'd learned sealing from- lies only kept together because Akane would back everything he said with a serious nod and that glint in her eyes that said she was enjoying everyone else's suffering.

It was almost a game- Ayaka would try some increasingly ridiculous stunt in an attempt to get him to slip up, get frustrated, sulk, then repeat.

Okimi found it endlessly hilarious. Tora would always repeat how remarkably stupidly she was going about it- their sprint across fire country had been anything *but* subtle.

Still, as the years moved with the tide and seasons wheeled by, the attempts continued.

"Hey, hey- little Ren, can you tell me about mr. Shukaku? I'll give you a piece of candy-"

“That’s remarkably desperate of you. He’s only one, you know?”

Ayaka yelped in surprise, dropping the sweet she’d been holding and whirling around to face him. “How- kami! How’d you sneak up on me? You’re like-” she spread her arms wide, face frozen in a thunderous expression- “super big! I *should* have noticed you.”

Shukaku settled down atop the seaside waves, pointedly silent. “You were too busy harassing Okimi’s one year old son for information he can’t possibly give about me.”

“Hey! You never know what could help! Just the other day I managed to wheedle out that your brother was an imperial traitor!” Kurama. The insinuation that he’d ever been part of the empire to turn traitor to begin with was… he had to bite back a smile. Tora had been proving disturbingly good at providing misleading information. “And- and combined with your sand, I’ve decided you’re actually a Sabaku clan summon! On a long term infiltration mission to Uzushiogakure!”

Shukaku gave her a pointed look. “And Okimi?”

“No!” Ayaka looked furious at the very suggestion. “She’s an Uzumaki! Therefore, she can’t be a spy. The ritual would have revealed her true intentions had that been the case, but it didn’t, so she just wanted to be an Uzumaki!”

“Ritual?”

Ayaka blanched and glanced around for a few seconds before, very unsubtly, turning tail and running away.

The sand to the side shifted slightly as Okimi climbed out of where she’d been hiding to grab the abandoned candy. “Ninshu. I’m fairly convinced it’s some form of bastardized ninshu.” She scoffed lightly, settling little Ren in her lap with a dopey smile. “Can’t believe the nerve of that woman, going after Ren… he can barely even speak!”

“The Uzumaki have never been known for such petty things as *logic* .” Okimi snorted softly in agreement. “Ninshu, though…” he hadn’t thought anything had remained of the practice besides what he and his siblings remembered.

Interesting. So very interesting…

The next time Ayaka cornered him- on the shattered and smoking island where he’d been practicing fuuinjutsu- he simply held out a fist to her in silent expectation.

Her face melted from confusion to anger, to exasperation and confusion back again. “So you conned Okimi into telling you about the ritual? You won’t actually be able to perform it- legend goes, it's older than hand seals. It takes a very specific knowledge to use-”

“Ninshu.”

The dominant expression on her face settled on confusion. “What’s ninshu?” Shukaku just looked pointedly at his hand- and, carefully, she reached out her own-

A space undone-

Chakra *rushed* through her coils, burning with the Juubi’s remnant impression, the ancient *age* of it all- Shukaku knew what she felt, just as much as he felt- resolve, to serve Uzushiogakure, joy for a son, sorrow for fallen elders, strength like fuuinjutsu written across her arm, into her soul, chakra-

She felt- *age.* Hundreds of years of quiet desert, interspersed by a slow, methodical inquisition into the nature of fuuinjustu- the nature of reality. Sealed silence, sorrow, burning cities, warring clans, *red eyes spinning* in overwhelming-

A memory of family, terrible devotion, sorrow. The weight of time.

Ayaka reeled back with a gasped sob, crumpling into the ocean surf as she just- breathed, short, sharp gulps hidden by the rhythmic crashing waves, white on sand, shore to sea. A long minute passed before she struggled to her feet, chakra flickering in dangerous agitation. “You- you're the Ichibi, aren’t you?” Shukaku nodded softly, dispelling his henge. “What the- *what was that?* I expected the second half but… how can you feel *eyes* .”

“I’d rather not-”

“Right. Sorry, if that was too personal… I’m not supposed to talk about anything in the ritual to anyone- not even really supposed to tell people about the ritual in the first place. As far as other people ask, it’s just a test of determination, got it?” She shuddered, clearly shaken from the chakra, the *impressions* she’d felt. “That was… I don’t think I ever understood how lonely a long life could be until now.”

Shukaku’s expression grew a bit pinched. “As I said, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Fine. Fine… but you’re the *Ichibi.* ” Yes, obviously- “you *have* to tell me about your barrier seals- Akane knew, but she never wrote *anything* down! You must have some super cool…” That hadn’t… exactly been what he’d expected, but the Uzumaki had always been a bit insane. Now, how to explain unified sealing theory to an Uzumaki to get the least number of future explosions…

Ayaka blew up her house not even two weeks later.

Mission failed.

When Okimi was forty, he told her that one day he’d leave back to wind country. He gave her a lot of reasons, some of which weren’t even that bad. They both knew the truth though.

He couldn’t watch another of his precious people die. Not yet.

When Okimi was just over sixty years old, sealmaster and matriarch of the Sunaarashi Uzumaki branch family- when Tora was eighty three and owed her long life almost entirely to the life-support network he’d carefully maintained over the years- they stood together one last time on the shores of Uzushiogakure, pastel bright buildings stark against an overcast sky.

It was a small gathering- Ayaka, Okimi, Tora, and a few odd tanuki summons whose first actions upon being called were to run over and give him fur care tips. Everyone in Uzushiogakure who *knew* him, together once more.

Bittersweet. As the waves lapped against his legs, sending smoothly henged fur adrift in floating patterns, he wondered if this was the last time he’d see the city so alive. One day, his memories told him, this beautiful place would be ash and nothing more than cold ruins.

He put such thoughts out of his mind, leaning down so he was at eye-level with the few people on the beach. “It’s been a long journey, together… I’m proud of you, Okimi. You too, Tora.”

“Your henge is *so* much better than the first time-” Tora squawked in indignation as the sand beneath her gave out, throwing her onto her back, but there was the undeniable glint of sorrow, of giddy determination that she *could* still withstand a bit of roughness like that. “Okay, okay. I’ll miss you, and the way all the Uzumaki look at your fuuinjutsu like you’re the son of the Sage.” Shukaku *very* carefully didn’t react to that one.

Okimi just pressed her head against his own, tears dripping down like so much salt, quiet memories and eternities spent together, mere moments in time- “I’ll miss you, dad.” It was unfair how that still ruined his emotional composure, even now. “Take care. Put the most ridiculous fuuinjutsu traps in your labyrinth. I swear, if I don’t hear someone complaining the next glass shipment…”

“Yeah! Get those wind bastards!” Ayaka’s cheer was contagious, and the next few minutes had the entire group clamoring over themselves to give him increasingly more inane ideas for fuuinjustu to plaster around wind country. Even the tanuki pitched in with an idea or two, but the younger of the now considerably larger duo was *still* obsessing about fur care.

“Alright.” His voice rumbled over a sudden silence. “I’ll be sure to torment them with your devious ideas. It’s been a long journey together. Okimi… if you ever pass through wind country, don’t be afraid to drop by.”

She raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Into your nasty labyrinth of death where mom almost abandoned me as a kid? Don’t mind if I *don’t* .” Shukaku chuckled softly- brokenly. It was the last time either of them would see the other, and they knew it. “Ayaka has something to give… I… take it as a last memory of me, will you? We worked hard on it.”

The elder held out her hand, unsealing a small scroll into her palm. “You’ll love this- it’s a chakra folding technique.” Her smile grew positively devious. “You know, if only I knew of a giant chakra construct which could benefit from a way to compress their chakra to a much, *much* smaller size… alas, this nice technique’s gonna go to waste-” a gust of wind blew it out of her hand and right to Shukaku. “Oh! Didn’t see you there, sir giant chakra construct.”

Cradling a gift more precious than anything he’d received since the days of the sage, for the last time standing aside what he might have, in a different world- one with a different future, called *family…* there was really only one thing appropriate to say. “Okimi. If nothing else- remember this.” A pit of sorrow in his chest, regret and the solemnity of closure- “I will love you *always* .”

Okimi just stepped back, face bitter. Understanding. “Goodbye, Shukaku-” and he turned away from them, away from Uzushiogakure and her glittering barriers- back to the sea and sand and the long march of time.

To home.

To another journey.

Bittersweet ending, crazy Uzumaki who just up and decided they care more about new seals than a bijuu, and another chapter that's way longer than I thought it was going to be. Who knows what this will change about the future?

(Me. I know. Suffer.)

Also, to clarify: Uzumaki sealing: a lot of people trying to figure random stuff out, and piecing together the pieces. Shukaku's sealing: find out a few components then extrapolate outwards.

They Who Judge Time

Chapter 11: They Who Judge Time

“What drives you to learn senjutsu? What is your desire?”

“To kill a certain man.” Shukaku hated how much he sounded like Sasuke in that moment. “And in doing so, save many more.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The sands of wind country were lonely, rolling as the dunes ever stood, transient to the likes of immortals- like waves, so similar as they moved over the years. Moments stretched long, pearls on a string of time- to eternity as he moved through the desert winds he watched the natural emptiness of the desert, and found himself at home.

It was almost natural- the way each of his steps felt the uncountable grains of sand, the strength of wind-scoured rock yet resolute against the harsh sun- to think of this place as home… Uzushiogakure had been beautiful, but the towering walls of his labyrinth and the orderly deep of his warren would always be *his* . The memories of this place- building it, repairing it, *living* in it for hundreds and hundreds of years… it never failed to be bitter, yet so sweet. Nostalgic, he supposed, for its own time.

Shukaku settled back into his labyrinth as though he’d never left; the routine of carefully plastering a thousand dangerous seals over every surface, the *freedom* to just… be. It was something he hadn’t realized he’d missed until he spent two weeks straight working on minor alterations to a barrier seal. As much as he missed all he’d left behind in the eye of the sea, the sand yet called to him.

The years whispered in unending susurration, as the wind blew, and he slowly focused back onto his first goal- the goal that had carried him forward since Indra had first turned his eyes on his brother and bound him- *eliminate Zetsu* .

In that, he focused on a single thing. *Fuuinjutsu* . Between his own knowledge and the uzumaki script… they had revealed some of the deepest mysteries of the sealing arts to him. To them, the mere fact that they *could* was enough- to Shukaku, he needed to understand *why* .

Fitting the Uzumaki components into a unified theory would be a pain… but for the first time, *finally* , after so many years he had all the pieces he needed. It would have to be enough.

The last character of an seal to span the entire floor of his warren, crawling up his walls and swirling in intricate scripting across the roof twisted into existence, the entire creation shifting into alignment with itself and everything else-

Elsewhere, space decided as chakra rushed through the seal in furious torrents, brilliant light searing through the lines of the seal and raced through its immense pathways, was *right here* . *There* superimposed itself over a space fifty feet up and exactly centered on the middle of his warren, and the blank air decided it wasn’t.

Space tore open with the deep chime of shattered- metal-not-metal, existence itself- and a seam in existence opened to the sky in the land of birds. Shukaku laughed in victory as he watched the chakra swirl through the seal in mesmerizing patterns, a sea of gentle light swirling all around him- it had taken him *years* to make this seal, but to prove a theory…

He cut off the chakra flow, slumping to the floor in sudden exhaustion, exultant- he’d been *right* . The Uzumaki might have been able to throw open a rift in barely a few characters and swirling lines,

but he’d taken the very basics of sealwork and thrown and *built* a space-time seal. It was perfect.

The exhaustion stole over him, and he dreamed of memories, future, and seals in infinite perfection. He dreamed of possibility.

With the Uzumaki providing the end result, building the bridge between simple characters and esoteric concepts wasn’t hard. What *was* , though, was consolidating them from their immense size to the few characters used in Uzumaki space-time seals. The sheer amount of complicated, subtle interactions that held the characters together was… frustrating- a thousand blanks in the complicated web of a unified sealing theory.

The years passed quickly as he worked on fuuinjutsu and a thousand other projects- it was all too easy to be sucked back into the unending effort, slowly picking apart the thousand possibilities in each symbol. To quietly isolate what did what, to understand.

He took the uzumaki script, tore it apart and rebuilt it again- lesser, to an extent, its seals sprawling massive over his warren’s walls so unlike the concise Uzumaki characters- but, in its own way consistent. Space-time seals were barriers were explosive elemental tags- his seals were seals. Everything built off itself, together-

To himself, he named it his own- tanuki script.

Kurama would be *so mad* if he ever found he’d named the fundamental laws of fuuinjutsu after himself.

The defenses for his labyrinth reflected his progress with tanuki script. First a few basic space-time seals, incorporated into the mix of barriers and explosive tags. Spatial distortions only added to the difficulty in traversing the maze.

By this point, he had to admit to himself that the maze was less an exploitation of human psychology he’d hoped, and more just an

attempt to see *exactly* how much he could ruin the day of anyone who wandered inside.

Seals that interacted with the soul were the most complicated- if the way the Uzumaki worked with them was strange, then the logical jumps needed to work them into tanuki script were… so much worse. They were simply *odd* - the rules were the same, but twisted- different in a way that spoke to something so incomprehensibly *other* , separate.

The seals were unique in a thousand different ways- they always interacted through countless intermediaries and odd laws, through the chakra networks, piggybacking off the chakra unconsciously released and absorbed- it was, frankly, *frustrating* . Space-time seals were easy in comparison, but there were secrets hidden in the impossible, and he *wanted* those.

A hundred years later began the painstaking process of tearing down the entire structure and replacing it with a seal- and, if he made the walls just a bit higher, and the cliffs a small bit sheerer, then nobody needed to know. It was was his greatest work yet- twenty years of effort simplifying a truly immense matrix into something he was satisfied with-

It was the first component in his masterwork.

To the citizens of wind country, the wanderings of the Ichibi were bizarre and unknowable- an implacable entity that walked where it would, in unpredictable patterns across the vast deserts. Sometimes, to them, he would appear as a specter in the distance- a portent of doom that came and left as it willed, leaving only immense footprints in his wake.

To Shukaku, there *was* a pattern there- written deep into the bedrock of wind country, where the far edges of his control ground the rock to dust and patiently imbued it with chakra. To where the lines scrawled

out deep with his most secure sanctum sat, waiting in all their modular complexity to be etched into the bones of the earth.

The Ichibi wandered.

Ootsutsuki Shukaku wrote a seal the size of wind country.

Two hundred and twenty-odd years after he'd left from Uzushiogakure, Shukaku looked over his calculations, glanced over to the remaining schematics for the part of his masterwork not yet built, then glanced back at the calculations that stubbornly refused to change. The numbers just sat there- *smugly* - he'd done the math three times over, and the final value was *still* its eminently punchable self.

He might have made a… small… mistake in designing a seal the size of wind country.

He couldn't *power* it.

That wasn't a problem he'd ever had to deal with before- bijuu sized reserves were surprisingly useful when it came to powering some of the more complicated, esoteric seals, and chakra storage seals worked on all the rest. *This* seal, however- he could store all his chakra for a hundred years, and still not activate it for more than a small time. No matter how he redesigned the functional components to the network- no matter how efficient- the seal was simply too large for even a bijuu.

Well. He knew exactly what to do in this case-

First- sulk. That was the one and only step when it came to such an embarrassing reason for a seal to fail. He could understand making an error on the seal. He could even understand accidentally blowing up all of wind country. What he hated was simply forgetting that… chakra was a thing that seals needed. It was the height of embarrassment.

Perhaps he had been too focused on his sealing- *again* . Sighing in barely concealed frustration, a flex of his chakra *tore* the intricate diagrams off the wall, a hit from his tail shattering the stone for good measure. It'd felt like such a good idea, at the time… he loped off into the darkness of his warren, reaching out with his sand to pull free a scroll he hadn't looked at for hundreds of years. One of his few irreplaceable possessions.

Learning that chakra folding technique would be a good way to take his mind off things. Remembering how to relax was *so much work* …

A rasenshuriken sputtered and died in his palm, exploding outwards with a screeching roar of wind and enough force to tear his arm off at the elbow. A sharp hiss of pain sliced through the air in its wake as he crashed to the ground, carefully cradling the stump as he pulled at the desert sand to augment his natural regeneration.

He supposed he just didn't understand the technique. How *Naruto* of all people had managed to do it in mere months when he- with, admittedly, several hundred year-long breaks- hadn't managed it for *centuries* was beyond him. Something about-

He froze, a harsh grin etching itself across his face as a few separate thoughts connected, and an idea he'd abandoned as fantasy suddenly felt a lot more feasible. It was *perfect* -

Well, except for how he had *absolutely no idea* how senjustu worked. Other than that… wind release: amenomihashira had a nice ring to it, he thought. Hopefully his enemies would agree.

Now, to find a geezer…

As Shukaku *finally* stumbled to a halt beneath one of the immense mushrooms of Mount Myoboku, he finally appreciated what his memories had said of the place being *hard to find* . Hidden in mountain country, past implausibly high peaks, winding caverns that

only a human of exceptional contortionism would have been able to fit through- snowy ravines and, ultimately, a sea of rocky spikes, *hard to find* was a misnomer.

“Hey!” He glanced up from where he’d *finally* gotten a place to rest, glaring at the small toad who’d yelled at him from a different mushroom. “Yeah, you- weird sand tanuki! This is *toad* country, bastard! You’re not gonna get nothing from us!” As though he could stop him. For a moment Shukaku’s glare flickered to offense- ah, *right* . He was *small* right now.

Being small was strange. He could barely remember how trepidatious he’d been of growing up, so long ago- but, while being small was certainly nice for his dexterity, everything was just so *big* . It was disorienting-

“Yeah, yeah- don’t just *sit there.* Scram, tanuki!” The toad hopped from foot to foot, excitedly glaring at him. “You’ll find me a *very* tough guard to get through, you know-”

“I’d like to speak to Gammamaru, please.” The impossible depth of his voice *immediately* undid any intimidating affect the guard-toad’s bravado might have had. On an observer, because Shukaku was too tired to be intimidated by someone he could crush with his pinky finger.

“Uh… I’ll take you to Fukasaku, but if you try to play a prank, or steal something, or set the forest on fire- I’ll know! And I’ll beat you up! We’ve had enough of that with the…” he flinched, then hopped deeper into the forest. “C'mon you’re gonna be late if you don’t hurry up. I don’t guide slowpokes!”

Sighing in exasperation Shukaku leapt after him, chakra-empowered leap shattering the ground beneath him as he raced to catch up. Being small came with *some* disadvantages, and the amount of random chakra exercises that were suddenly *much* more useful was startlingly large. It was almost as if most of the movement techniques he’d known from his past life were designed for *humans* .

“-and then Taika- he’s cute, you’ll like him- got all mad! He went and burnt down one of the trees, and Shima stomped him! He’s so small- you should have seen him- little tiny fox, struggling to get out from underneath *Shima* .”

Shukaku blinked. “I thought all the foxes died in Ku- the Kyuubi’s ambush?”

“Nope! The ones that were out and around came to us for sanctuary, so we have these little cute kits…” the guard trailed off, looking distinctly mortified- “is what I’d say, if we had foxes here. Because we don’t. Have foxes, that is. They don’t live here. Because they all died-”

“I get it.”

The toad chuckled weakly, glancing around in sheepish wariness as they bounded into the village proper. “Well, we’re here- it’s that big building across the lake. Gamamaru’s in there, but Fukasaku’s not gonna let you do *nothing* to him! Why *are* you trying to see him, anyways?”

“He knew my father.”

The toad-guard leaned in, looking interested. “Really?”

“Yeah. He was a toad summoner.” More or less.

The toad, on the other hand, blinked in perplexed confusion. “But… how can a tanuki be a toad summoner?” Nevermind- Shukaku decided he was *not* going to be explaining tailed beast lore to a random toad. If he had questions, then he’d find him later. “Hey- come back-” or preferably, *never* . He jumped across the lake in a single leap, landing neatly in the vast entrance to the Great Toad Sage’s domain.

His first thought was that a young Fukasaku’s goatee was *incredibly* suave. His second thought was entirely focused on the pain such a

small stick could deliver as it crashed down on his head. “ *Knock* next time, kid! Youngsters, no respect…”

Shukaku rolled his eyes. “I’m older than *you* .”

“...oh.” A sheepish Fukasaku was almost odder than how handsome he looked right now. “Well, then, before I take you to the sage, I’ll have to know a little bit about-”

A third voice echoed from deeper in the building. “Let him in, Fukasaku. Hm… I wasn’t expecting this, but… yes, I can see…” Gamamaru’s voice dropped off to muttered musings as they came to a halt beneath his pool. “You’re the odd one, yes… I remember this. Ruining all my perfectly good prophecies. Little Hagoromo adored you.” He paused for a long moment. “Why are you here, again? I don’t quite remember.”

“He didn’t even tell you yet, geezer.” Fukasaku leaned in close to Shukaku, whispering into his ear- “I think he’s getting senile-”

“I heard that, kid-”

“-so cut him some slack, eh?”

Shukaku nodded quickly, stepping forward to the base of the pool. “I’m here to learn senjutsu.”

Gamamaru inclined his head, silent for a long moment before turning his head to look at Shukaku with- eyes that felt deeper than the universe, a piercing gaze that *pricked* at the edge of his mind. “Hm. Yes… I can see how you would take that path. And why- can’t forget the motive… your fuuinjutsu rivals those old fools who dammed a dragon vein and made the gelel… I trust you’ll use senjutsu for less… stupid… pursuits.”

“Uh… okay?” *Hopefully* the seal he’d been making wouldn’t lead to something so thoroughly useless. He wasn’t quite sure what *damming a dragon vein* meant, but it was probably bad.

“Right!” Fukasaku hit his stick on the floor, shattering the awkward silence. “Geezer, I’ll take this one to the training spikes and-”

“No.” Achingly slowly, the ancient toad pushed himself out of his pool to the crash of cascading water and Fukasaku’s shocked silence. “Go and bother your girlfriend-” Fukasaku spluttered something incoherent about how it wasn’t like that at *all* - “and relax. *I’ll* take care of Shukaku’s training. We have… *much* in common.”

Gamamaru walked beside him with a particularly unhurried gait- slow, but controlled, each movement precise, but not so much as to be mechanical. It was almost artistic, the way he neatly bent around every obstacle without once looking unduly strained. “Senjutsu… you more than match the requirements, but you are a… unique existence. Humans who fail to balance internal and external energies turn to stone. Or frogs, then stone, as it is at Mount Myoboku. You… well, you wouldn’t turn to stone.” They stopped at the edge of the toad’s domain, where the paradisiacal jungle faded to a forest of stone spikes. “You’d *explode* .”

Shukaku restrained a wince. “That sounds… unpleasant.”

“Hm… indeed. I imagine it would be a rather spectacular- painful- fireworks show.” They continued onwards, Shukaku barely managing to keep from impaling himself through excessive use of sand platforms, Gamamaru with impossible grace- he just *continued walking* over the spikes. “A word of caution; senjutsu is of nature, in nature. As a bijuu, you are unique in both your connection to nature and the malleability of your form. Do not use senjutsu in anything but your true state. Natural will attack unnatural…”

“-and I’d explode.”

Gamamaru chuckled softly. “You’re a fast learner, Shukaku. Hagoromo always praised that part of you… a shame, how those kids turned out. Asura was so kind, when I first saw him…” Shukaku gritted his teeth, but said nothing. He had *that* particular regret all too

often without someone *else* nagging him about it. “You’re too large for these spikes… we’ll go to the surrounding mountains. Plus, if you *do* end up exploding, then you won’t take out Mount Myoboku with you.” They trekked onwards, to a silent and snow-crushed land.

So began his training in senjutsu, with much the same energy as the rest of his experience- fascinating, but so, *so frustrating* .

If Fukasaku’s stick hurt, the large stone pillar Gamamaru had picked up *somewhere* was *so much* worse. It whistled through the air to *slam* against him any time his chakra even so much as hinted it was going out of balance. “Focus, Shukaku. You’ve mastered being still- now, master being centered in spirit.”

“I’m *trying* -” the pillar slammed down on his back again, cutting off his sentence in a pained wheeze. *That* time had just been unneeded- he hadn’t even been attempting to use natural energy then! “It’s just… slow.”

“Learning the sage arts is a lifelong pursuit. It's why we geezers are so good at it.” Gamamaru hopped neatly over the mountain he was balancing on, alighting perfectly on the peak of the next one over. “You can feel the eddies of natural chakra- observe how in stillness I gather natural chakra, and in movement I release it.”

He’d felt that the first time he even *sensed* natural chakra- the way it twisted in eddies around the Great Toad Sage, perfectly balancing itself in the stillness between breaths. It was awe-inspiring, how smoothly the elder toad used senjutsu. “Your chakra is… still.” It was- it was as still and calm as natural chakra, even when he wasn’t actively using senjutsu. “The natural chakra just… slips in. I don’t understand how you manage that.”

“Ah… I see your problem.” The pillar crashed down his back, then neatly continued onto an extra motion, pushing him off the peak. “Walk with me for a bit- something troubles you. You must understand yourself before you understand all of nature.” He leapt

off his peak, and Shukaku followed him as they bounded down to the winding stream that carved the depths of the valley so far below them. “What drives you to learn senjutsu? What is your *desire* ?”

“To kill a certain man.” Shukaku hated how much he sounded like Sasuke in that moment. “And in doing so, save many more.”

Gamamaru hummed softly in consideration. “I see. You worry about the future, and how your actions might have changed it. If anything you do will be enough.”

Shukaku froze, slowly turning to the elder toad with barely constrained- emotion, just ecstatic joy, fear- “how did you know that?” It wasn’t really a question, as much as it was a *demand* .

The elder toad sighed, silent for a long minute as they bounded quickly through the mountains, following the stream until it cascaded into a small valley of alpine trees and an austere blanket of purest snow. “I found this place, several hundred years ago. It was a retreat, for me- soon, one day, it will be the foxs’ domain. They deserve some quiet after so much of humanity’s hatred. Rather like your brother, eh?”

“ *How* ? How did you know?”

Gamamaru’s *exhaustion* - the sheer weight of his age, was for a single moment all too apparent. “You are not the only being on this planet gifted with foresight. Though ours are different, I understand your position rather uniquely.”

“So you know of my knowledge because you saw it in the future?”

“Not quite.” They leapt down the final ledge to the valley below, pristine snow crunching under their weight. “I knew the moment your arrival shifted a great many things. Hm… how to make sense of this… ah! Let me tell you of the child of prophecy.” His gaze, so piercing- “Uzumaki Nagato. Uzumaki Naruto. I know a great deal

more than I might let on… the many futures press deeply on an old toad's mind, and sometimes even reality feels like a dream."

Shukaku followed him carefully through the forest, shifting the sand of his form so as not to destroy any of the trees. Eventually, they stopped at a small, barren hill in the center of the deep alpine domain. "If you knew the future-"

"I know a great deal about the trials of that troublesome blonde. But to understand my reasoning, you must understand- fate is not fixed. Prophecy is a tool- a word of woe is a desperate plea to *change this* . A prophecy of some indeterminate good is a lever on fate- to push it onto a path to great good."

Shukaku sat for a moment, silent. "I don't… it makes sense, but how does that relate-"

"To you? You find yourself separate from others because of this *knowledge* you have- a slight difference to yourself that nobody else can possibly relate to." Gamamaru rested a flipper on his back, the motion gentle- peaceful, in the snowed-in field. "Remember the last words of your father." *I will always love you* . "He spoke of a blond haired, blue-eyed child. Consider *why* I told him that prophecy."

"...to make sure, in the end, that when it came down to the final confrontation with Kaguya, my siblings had that *slight nudge* to listen to Naruto. They always took father's words seriously." A few words, alone- and the path of fate was twisted between victory or defeat.

"You understand. We *cannot solve everything* ." The conviction in that was so powerful it suffsed the air around him, rebounding off the natural chakra of the world as truth, as a fundamental law. "For those who judge time, we must choose our moments carefully. Do not be discouraged when you can't explain-" why he stayed with Asura, even after everything. Why he worked so hard on fuuinjutsu- "everything to even those closest to you. Just know that when your moment comes, you've done your part to keep the world living. Do not waste your foresight, Ootsutsuki Shukaku." The old toad's hand

ruffled the sand atop his head- “but, on the other hand… I believe in you. You will do great things one day, *have* done great things- never forget your conviction.”

Shukaku nodded, something settling- he would be ready.

Two months later Shukaku felt- ecstatic joy- himself, beaming pride- Gamamaru, pleased shock- himself. A myriad of *feelings* , sensations- so many things he just hadn’t noticed before as natural chakra settled perfectly into his own, suffusing his form with the faint sensation of- trees, stone, snow- sky and the breadth of all things.

He opened eyes that gleamed, pure mirrors of gold onto a mountain of snow, stone and vibrant *life* he’d never even suspected of hiding on the desolate peaks. He opened his eyes as the black markings along his body shivered, and bled to a brilliant gold.

He opened his eyes a sage.

Gamamaru’s vast stone room wasn’t so intimidating, when one could feel natural chakra. It was a cheerily bright place- so very *alive* , and he couldn’t help but bask in it- a good last memory before he left the toad’s domain. “One last thing, Shukaku… before you leave- a gift.” Gamamaru reached into the space behind his pool, carefully pulling one of the scrolls out of its stone casing and gently rolling it open. “I’m sure you’ve had… poor experiences with techniques that interact with your soul?”

Shukaku nodded in wry amusement. “The Yamanaka who tried had her brain turned to soup.”

Gamamaru smiled softly. “So you realize how attempting to tie you to a soul contract would be… very bad. Nevertheless, I wanted to give you the opportunity to sign the toad’s summoning scroll- a formality… in ink, of course. You *are* a sage of Mount Myoboku, and it is your right to sign the scroll.” A small pause, as Shukaku read the

two names on the scroll- “and… I thought you’d appreciate it for more… personal reasons.”

Written in blood, five fingerprints beneath-

Ootsutsuki Hagoromo.

Ootsutsuki Asura .

Shukaku stared at the scroll in silence for a long moment before pulling on the smallest bit of his sand and earth-natured chakra, grinding it into a fine powder. His name, he wrote in sand, for memory, and below, in place of a bloody handprint, he signed a symbol- sun and moon. A third name, below the others- *Ootsutsuki Shukaku.* “Thank… thank you for this. For training me in senjutsu, and offering your advice.”

“I’m not known as the Great Toad Sage for nothing, kid! It’ll be nice to see you again, one day…” he muttered something, below his breath, then waved to the door as the scroll disappeared in a puff of smoke. “You have much to do… better get going, young Ootsutsuki…”

Home once again- Shukaku stood in the silence of a desert at night, feeling the tranquil natural chakra of the sands and skies as he gathered the different chakra-types together. Pure chakra, burning blue. Golden natural chakra, rushing slowly, still and turbulent within him. Wind chakra, piercing and sharp, whistling, screaming so powerfully-

It was as a step forward- the moment where something impossible became *possible* . He’d come back with his knowledge of senjutsu to rewrite his grand seal into the very nature of the desert, powering it with the natural energy of the world. This- this was just the first step. Another step forward.

Piercing white light shone, daytime compressed into a single glowing sphere screeching as it formed out of nothing. Three chakra types combined, the very air around him humming with the strength of the energy cusped in the palm of his ginormous hand. How it moved, so beautifully deadly through the air- how it bloomed, expanding into a furious sphere of roaring winds a hundred feet across. He intoned in the deep of his voice, as the technique *screamed* - “wind release *: rasenshuriken!* ”

Hope you like my interpretation of Gamamaru! I've been looking forward to writing this chapter for a long time, cause' of all the character development and stuff.

Plus, cool big seal? What it do?

To everyone who guessed Shukaku was going to be learning senjutsu way back, you get a cookie. (cookie)

Binding

Chapter 12: Binding

He recognized that feeling- had felt it once before, forever ago- he reached out to the shared mindscape, and in the same moment felt the sharp bindings on his chakra restrain him.

A seal.

They'd sealed him.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

His grand seal was unique in a lot of ways. Unlike most seals it wasn't powered by a stored reservoir of chakra- rather, it was part of the natural *flow* of chakra through the desert. It was based on senjutsu, and between the sensitivity of nature chakra, the detailed soul-seal written into the basic frame of its form, and the sheer detail its size allowed, it was unparalleled at what it did.

Nothing and no one could hide from the eyes of his seal; all of wind country was revealed to him. Deep beneath his warren, in a sealed hall illuminated by a vast glowing spiral etched into the roof, a mile-wide pit of sant formed the core of the seal- sand ever shifting into figures and symbols as Shukaku polished and debugged the seal over a lonely hundred years.

When it was finished, every shinobi in wind country was displayed in that pool of sand as it contorted into an immense map of the ground above the seal. Theoretically, it was his best weapon against Hashirama's crusade against the tailed beasts- the moment he entered the desert, he'd know. A hundred years was a long time to plan.

Meanwhile, there were always seals to work on, and details to smooth out. If this was to work… it would have to go perfectly.

Things did not go perfectly. In fact, they went wrong before he even had the chance to think of *why* they went wrong.

It'd been over a thousand years. He deserved some slack for not remembering the exact timeline.

It started quickly, and only escalated from there. He'd been on a fairly routine jaunt outside of his labyrinth when the small crowd of shinobi approached him- weak chakra users, but threats nonetheless. It wasn't an altogether odd occurance- most would simply run at his presence, but there were always the odd groups that convinced themselves of the fame they'd get from killing a bijuu. Even some of the shinobi from almost a thousand years ago had been stronger than these particular fools.

The best laid plans of mice and men and idiotic tanuki bijuu were ever wont to go awry, though- it should have been simple. Kill the interlopers, adjust the strange glitch that kept showing implausibly powerful shinobi around the wind temple. Unfortunately, the seal didn't account for *weak* shinobi who very rapidly became *strong* .

For example, a user of the eight gates.

That simple plan was annihilated the moment two shinobi punched fingers through their hearts, and exploded into a furious scarlet conflagration of chakra. The waves of sand he'd sent toward them were batted aside in a single powerful blow- identical between the two of them- that *blew the desert* apart before them as they rocketed toward him-

The eighth gate, for a few minutes, let a human fistfight with a bijuu. Facing *two* , Shukaku realized the truth of that statement- one moment they were almost a thousand feet away from them, the next he was being punted into the sand, almost too fast to respond. Just

as the second volley of blows plummeted toward him he *grasped* the sand around him, twisting it inwards on itself and lighting a series of garnet red barriers that cooked the sand beneath them to glass in their power.

The first shinobi's fist collided with the barrier, and was crushed to a pulp in the same moment the first three layers shattered- his very body had begun to smoke, blood boiling at the edge of the wound. The second one landed a kick, breaking through the rest before the sheer momentum of his movement crashed him into Shukaku's head and threw them both back a hundred feet.

Tendrils of sand leapt out at the momentarily stunned taijutsu master, holding him for the barest fraction of a second as the sand painted itself over his skin in elegant patterns. The taijutsu master kicked away from him, cratering the desert in his wake, and Shukaku waited for a moment longer for him to reach the apex of his leap. "Gravity binding: seal!" Brilliant lines erupted into color across his body as he just- fell, slamming into the ground hard enough to leave a crater around his crushed, mutilated remains.

Shukaku glanced up as he charged a bijuudama, resolute to *end* this- he was in the desert, and a large explosion never hurt empty dunes. Furious eyes locked on the rest of the interlopers, standing in a circle around him, chakra pulsing in furiously quick patterns-

He swallowed the bijuudama, and opened his mouth to spit it at the shinobi who *dared-*

The first of the gate-users, body literally burning to ash before his eyes, uppercut him with enough force to shatter mountains, and the bijuudama speared harmlessly into the noonday sky-

He felt something grab onto him- like infinite hooks leeching at his chakra, and then there was a brilliant light, vicious pain, and *darkness* .

Drip .

A faint sound, pricking at the back of his mind in some long-forgotten memory of technicolor scenes, memory, matter, time… He shifted, wearily tucking his head into the crook of his elbow. Just a few more minutes… he didn't need to turn in that paper today, right? Right…

Drip.

No… Asura, he really hoped Asura hadn't gotten into his storage seals again. The amount of stuff that went missing… the amount of stuff they'd needed to reorganize… Indra had been so *mad* , seeing his best robe crumpled up into a ball and sealed away…

Drip-

He'd thought he'd sealed up the cave well enough… sure, the ocean literally washed into the cavity at high tide, but that wasn't a reason as to why he couldn't at least prevent that annoying leak from keeping him awake.

Drip.

Wearily, he opened his eyes, blinking at the darkness around him and the quicksand shifting- sticky- beneath him. What was the last thing he'd been doing, again? He'd been patching up the house with Okimi… no, he'd been working on his labyrinth, and warren- the seal. He'd been working on the seal, but the calculations…

No, sage mode had fixed that. He shook his head, trying to clear the last of the muddying fog that had stuck itself to his memories. He'd been fighting… yes, fighting two thoroughly annoying taijutsu masters who'd blitzed him fast enough to avoid most of his arsenal. Then…

Pain. Light and pain, and tearing hooks- he bounded upright in an instant, even as the floor beneath him pulled beguilingly at his legs, *binding* him. He recognized that feeling- had felt it once before,

forever ago- he reached out to the shared mindscape, and in the same moment felt the sharp bindings on his chakra restrain him.

A seal.

They'd *sealed* him. Roaring in frustration, he pulled himself out from the binding quicksand and trudged to the boundaries of his tight constraints, a massive sluice gate welded to the edges of stone with shimmering lines of fuuinjutsu. No matter- he was a *master* of fuuinjutsu- escaping should be simple enough.

It wasn't.

It didn't take him more than a quick glance to analyze the seal- it was *terrible* , so very weak- but also next to impossible for him to interact with from the inside. It prevented him from doing… almost anything. Sage mode was beyond him, bound as he was into a cramped seal- and his fuuinjuutsu was next to useless *within* the mindscape. No matter how complicated a seal he drew, he was trapped in a dream- his true form just a mass of chakra flimsily held behind a faulty seal.

Roaring in fury, he pounded against the impermeable stone, against the metal grate which dented- *ever* so very slightly- at the immense force of his rage. "Let me *out!* Free me from this- prison, *human!* " It had to be a human he was sealed in. Nothing else would be able to withstand the force of the chakra he'd focused on destroying the seal. There should have been *some* degradation-

There was no response.

The seal felt timeless- claustrophobic, even though he had no small amount of space to move around, and terribly uncomfortable as the quicksand pulled down at him every time he stopped moving. Of everything, though, the worst was how *boring* it was. Even alone in his labyrinth there was always something to do, the option to leave, or even the shared mindscape to talk to Kokuo or the others. Trapped in the seal- the days felt empty.

As the days passed in never-ending silence, he studied the fuuinjutsu that bound him. It was… uninspired- simple, but effective, leaning heavily leaning on some- obviously stolen, by how crudely it was soldered together with the space-time components- Uzumaki seals that affected the soul. Circles within circles- his soul bound within and without, his chakra swirling in the seal on his *hands* of all places- it was… odd. Noneucledian, and probably mostly unintentional…

Nevertheless, five days- or a week… it was somewhat hard to tell- he found the first major weakness in the seal. With his *consciousness* inside the seal and his *soul* tangled both inside and out, it was all too easy to hijack his jinchuuriki's senses.

First- sight. As far as he could tell, they were in a sprawling temple complex near the border between earth and fang country, somewhat close to the daimyo's palace. For the most part the actions of his jinchuuriki were austere- he would wake up in the morning, meditate for several hours, eat a small meal, converse with the other monks, eat another small meal, then meditate and fall asleep. Other than a few of the monks, people distanced themselves- even the unsubtle shinobi who followed his every move never seemed comfortable to be in the same room as him.

Good for them. Maybe they'd survive when he got out of this- ignominy.

Next, oddly enough, was tactile sensation- it came unconsciously as the monk went through his daily routine, and had it not been for his human past he might have dismissed it as just another piece in the seal's torture. Subtly, too- a brush of fingers off a warm cup in the morning. The cool bite of the desert air at night.

Taste was next, and if there was anything bearable about being sealed, it was the ability to taste food again. Usushiogakure had been positively tortuous at times, able to *smell* everything but knowing that attempting to eat was pointless. It was an almost odd

sensation, after more than a thousand years of *not* having to eat- the textures, flavors of even the simplest foods were exquisite.

Hearing was last- and in that he learnt the most of anything.

His jinchuuriki's name was Bunpuku. He was a monk in the wind temple.

He'd chosen his fate.

In sudden fury against the person who'd *chosen* to ruin his life- not because he'd gone on a rampage, not because Hashirama had handed him out like candy, but just *because* - he poured the full force of his willpower against the seal, *demanding* his chakra to move- just a little. The walls of the seal shook under the force of his rage before a faint blue chakra moved through the seal, reinforcing it.

Shukaku knew seals. He knew exactly what was happening as Bunpuku's chakra network reinforced the damaged seal, returning it to its pristine state. He knew that even as everything in the mindscape of his prison was *fake* , that little bit of chakra- that was actually there.

Reaching out, he clasped the chakra in his hand and *pulled* .

Bunpuku appeared on the other side of the gate, head clutched in his hand. "What have you done, beast?"

"I've disrupted your fuuinjutsu." Not all that much, but seeing the man sweat at the imagined failure of his seal was *cathartic.* "Release me."

"Never." *Damn* it. His sand ground against itself in frustration at the firm denial- he absolutely *did not* want to deal with being sealed into Gaara- or really, being sealed for the next hundred years at all. He had *things* he'd planned, and this was getting in the way of everything. "I will not surrender to you, beast. My sacrifice is noble." Ah- that was something. Even to him and his limited human

interaction, that sounded as though he was trying to convince himself.

A grin he didn't truly feel spread across his face- giddy, *soft* - something that wouldn't have looked out of place on Chomei. "You would think that… but, on the time scales of immortals, what are you but a nuisance? Your sacrifice is ultimately meaningless. Harmful even! You have no idea what you're messing with, human."

"I've heard enough of this." The fuuinjutsu's chains lashed out from the seal, wicked hooks binding into the essence of his being and dragging him, pulling- as the quicksand shifted over his form, he glared at Bunpuku one last time. "Be silent, beast."

The faint echoes of the chakra he'd grabbed hummed softly in his hand- a piece of something he wasn't supposed to have, a *connection* . He laughed, and it was a harsh, angry thing- " *no.* "

Shukaku chuckled softly as an aggrieved Bunpuku appeared beyond the gate *again* . "Maybe your mediation fails you? Perhaps you've forgotten that in seeking out what lies within you, then you only find *me* ."

"Shut *up* . I don't have the time to deal with you right now, monster." He held out a hand, and the bindings pulsed, pushing him down. "In here, others are safe from you. I will not repeat my reasoning again- the other monks already believe me unstable.

"Perhaps you are?" The bite of hooks against his being, pulling him deeper to circles within circles, terrible fuuinjutsu grating against his very being- it was *painful* . There had been few humans he truly hated, but this- this priest who was supposed to be kind- he *despised* him. He pulled at where he could sense his chakra, laughing in his deep rumble as the chains shivered beneath its corrosive force. "You never know- the most despicable of people hide their demons away. You love your control-"

Bunpuku turned his back on him, silently walking away as the chains struggled to drag him beneath the quicksand- but there was *anger* there.

Perfect.

His sealed chakra roiled against the agitation, seething with the Juubi's malicious taint against the anger resplendent against him. All he needed was just a little bit more…

Shukaku was a constant presence- unsleeping, always waiting- every time he'd meditate he'd pull him down into the seal, responding to his sanctimonious vitriol with vitriol of his own. Every day, he could see the faint frustration on his face grow more pronounced, evident in the faint bags beneath his eyes, the quiet lines of frustration on his brow.

Every day, as the chains dragged him to drown in endless morasses of quicksand, he grasped more and more of Bunpuku's chakra to himself, and the connection was only stronger. Just over a year into his incarceration, he managed to poke into his mind as he was having a conversation with one of the elderly monks, discussing the teachings of a pilgrim from the fire temple.

For a moment he waited, listening carefully to the elderly monk's words- he wouldn't waste this moment. He was so *close* to freedom. "...and, Bunpuku, as we are given kindness by others, we then give unto others our kindness. Yet, if we are only given hate, then what are we to give in return but love?"

He chuckled, a long, drawn out sound in the space between their minds that caused Bunpuku to flinch softly. "You've done a really good job giving me *love* , Bunpuku. You make a truly terrible monk-"

"I *don't!* " He froze as the elder looked at him quizzically, then in restrained *fear* .

“ *How* it hurts, little child, to see them hate you- does it not? To see them fear you?” He pressed his chakra against the grate, feeling it shiver. “They hate you, they hate *me* - and yet I’m still here, aren’t I? Not quite so out of mind, only ever out of sight- but they can see you, and for all your sacrifice they *shun* you.” Not a word of that hadn’t been true.

The seal shuddered for a moment against some unnamable emotion of Bunpuku’s, before a sea of suffusing blue chakra poured through the cracks in the stone, sealing it ever tight. “I don’t have to listen to you, demon-” the two shinobi who’d been following him forever leapt down, Kunai to his back and throat, and he startled just long enough for Shukaku to grab another chunk of the man’s chakra.

“Monk. That’s enough. You will return to your rooms at once.” The firm grip they kept on his arms were obvious in their threat- he didn’t have another option.

Shukaku impressed the sensation of *red eyes swirling* , terrible control onto Bunpuku, and he shivered beneath the *weight* of the memory. “It’s terrible, isn’t it- being trapped?” Bunpuku shook his head in rapid denial, a faint shiver running down his body at Shukaku’s taunts.

The elderly priest recovered his composure as the two shinobi dragged his student out the door. “Ah… Bunpuku, remember my teachings. I’ll be here tomorrow if you need me.” In the depths of his seal, carefully guarded against Bunpuku’s thoughts, Shukaku smiled softly at the small kindness.

He needed to cultivate Bunpuku’s hate- he’d never know his thoughts on that small moment, just one in a sea of fear- but there was something satisfying in knowing that his father hadn’t been wrong about humanity.

The two shinobi threw Bunpuku into his austere room, slamming the door shut behind them as they took their places in the rafters. For a long moment there was silence as Bunpuku settled into a meditative

pose almost automatically, and by the time he remembered *exactly* what that entailed he was already standing just outside Shukaku's seal. "You *talked* to me-"

"Of *course* I did. I'm sure after our many, *many* enlightening conversations in the depths of *this very seal*, you didn't think that I was some sort of some *dumb* beast?"

"I *hate* you." The words were vitriolic, but said by Bunpuku they carried an absolute surety behind them- as though he was completely at peace with the fact. It might have well been a law of the universe. "You have ruined a great many things, beast."

His laugh was sharp- bitter. They sought to control- to bind him, then sought to justify themselves. How awful. "I've never ruined anything. The last time I blew up a city was almost a thousand years ago- humans kill each other a thousand times faster than I ever have." A lie. He *knew* he'd been a major cause of death in Indra and Asura's war- a single bijuudama could destroy a city, and they were all too easy to make.

"You've defiled a great portion of wind country, Ichibi. With you removed, the labyrinth will finally be free from your demonic taint."

Shukaku just… stared at him for a long moment, trying- desperately trying not to roar with laughter. *Demonic taint* ? That was… probably one of the stupidest things he'd ever heard, and he'd been blessed with Kurama for a brother. "Well, then. I'm afraid your sacrifice has been for nothing. My home's 'taint' will remain until the rocks are worn down to sand and memory. You've elected yourself to be hated quite easily, for nothing at all-"

The chains lashed out from the seal, digging into his *self* and dragging it down- but he only smiled as he felt Bunpuku's emotions against the mass of his chakra.

Close.

Closer .

Bunpuku strode uneasily through the early morning chill, chakra uneasy as he resolutely ignored the uneasy quiet around him. As far as Shukaku knew, most of the monks were in morning meditation- but Bunpuku rarely meditated anymore. Dared not, lest he come face to face with *him* . “It must be such a shame, to be treated as something… other.”

The priest’s hand clenched into a fist. “Shut up.” A few of the other monks glanced at him oddly from across the courtyard before hastily returning to their own work as he glanced back.

“They don’t like you… you call me beast, but to them- aren’t you the *monster* -”

“Shut up! Just- just leave me *alone!* ” His anger sparked in a flash of killing intent- a furious boil of frustration lanced in a single deep, calming breath.

It was enough, though. Only the faintest hint of his chakra escaped the seal, flowing into his coils- but for someone with *his* chakra control, then even that minuscule amount was enough. Shukaku pushed out most of the chakra he’d stolen from Bunpuku, carefully kneading it together as it flickered through his coils-

Bunpuku’s eyes opened wide, and the seal lashed out at him in furious fear- but he just laughed. Even as the chains dragged him beneath the choking quicksand he still laughed, coalescing the sliver of escaped chakra just under the eighth gate. “Bunpuku-” his voice was softer- more like it had been, all those years ago with Okimi-Asura, Indra. “I’m sorry it had to come to this-” the chakra flickered out of his tenketsu, *grabbing* onto the ever-present sand settled in the cracks of the stone, drifting in invisible eddies through the air- twisting it into a simple series of fuuinjutsu characters.

A line of script that had just enough chakra behind it to settle onto Bunpuku's stomach- right where the seal lay.

Within the mindscape, Shukaku watched in rapt attention as a section of the fuuinjutsu binding him flashed scarlet and crumbled away. *Freedom*- it was right there- he *pushed* at his chakra with the fullness of his willpower, forcing an immense chunk of it out of the seal with furious force. It tore through Bunpuku's coils and blasted out of his tenketsu, twice over malicious- once the Juubi's influence, twice the sharp rage of his killing intent as it twisted and turned in eddies, like smoke-

It drifted off the priest's body as his mind glazed over in bloody madness, a single, powerful tail manifesting in burning chakra behind his back.

Beneath his heavy chakra, the priest's coils *burned* . Chakra coils were *hard* . Shukaku roared in frustration and heard Bunpuku roar in the courtyard outside as he desperately tried to mold his chakra into the sand and bring it up for fuuinjutsu, fighting against the flickering remnants of his jinchuuriki's will as it spiked madly. Fine control was *impossible* with such a *nuisance* interrupting him-

He *would not be caged* . Shukaku refused to be bound again. Pained screams erupted across the courtyard as he further pushed his chakra through the seal the chakra roiling off Bunpuku's form was scarlet red, furiously seething black- one by one the lines of fuuinjutsu crumbling beneath the weight of chakra pulling through the seal. The sand *almost* came to his call- he could feel it twitching to return to his full control, ready to transform in the familiar fuuinjutsu script as it his chakra reached out in eager desire.

A flicker of faint will disrupted his chakra control *again* . All he had to do was let him out- this was between *them* . Nobody else would have to get hurt… something slammed into his side, tossing his small body to the ground as he reached deeper-

The last few reinforcing characters faded in a splutter of sparks, patterns in lines of hidden seals flashing across the sluice-gate holding him in before it was blasted aside- his chakra was his. *Freedom* . Shrugging aside the chains that still desperately tried to hold him back, he raced for the exit *so close*-

A specter faded into existence in the gaping entrance, head clutched in his hands as the hiss of his pain rattled the walls of the seal. A long second passed as the chains renewed their efforts, and the wavering figure solidified into someone so very familiar. “You *beast.* You- you monster-” there was true hate in those words, rage that pulled at his chakra in beguiling whispers of unending destruction… Shukaku charged onwards through the quicksand with a furious roar of pain and *anger* , and Bunpuku bowed his head solemnly. “So be it. Gate of opening: open! Gate of healing: open! Gate of life: open!”

His chakra furiously bloomed in size, fighting against Shukaku’s chakra as it screamed through his coils- “Gate of pain: open!” He screamed, dropping to his knees, but his willpower asserted its sovereignty over his body. “Gate of limit: open! Gate of view: open!”

The quicksand blasted back from him, the sheer strength of chakra slowly pushing back against Shukaku’s inevitable advance- “Gate of wonder: open.” Locked in place, one against the other, Bunpuku sweating as he struggled to maintain control of the chakra raging through his coils, something snapped down over both their chakra. Everything *froze* .

Before his furious eyes, the characters on the seal flickered back to life, one after another. The last one flared into existence with a blinding light, and when it faded the metal grate was welded back to its awful aperture. “You would sacrifice your life to keep me contained- *pathetic* . The only one I’ve ever wanted to hurt out of your little gate-using party was *you* .” He’d been close enough to *taste* the natural energy of reality outside- to feel the sand and sky… “You wouldn’t have even needed to die. *This* is *all your fault* .” Beyond him, incontrovertible visible in the bloody streaks they

painted across Bunpuku's vision, the destroyed courtyard dripped scarlet with the blood of slaughtered monks.

Bunpuku merely turned away from him in exhausted rage. "Rot in your hell forever, *demon* ."

As the shinobi picked up Bunpuku's unconscious body and dragged him down the corridors of the wind temple, down staircase after staircase until the very air grew cold, Shukaku returned his glare with an exhausted, wry smirk. "I'm not the only one who's going to be left to rot…" and then as the exhaustion of it all caught up to him, sleep claimed its sovereignty over him.

He dreamed- of darkness, tragedy, and bitter tears.

For the first year alone in the dungeons beneath the wind temple, Bunpuku refused to speak to him. For the first year alone in the dungeons beneath the wind temple, Shukaku played the memory of dead monks, ripped apart by *his* chakra- his mind mourning that Bunpuku hadn't just *let him* go.

The second year was… worse. Occasionally Bunpuku would try to meditate to pass the endless boredom of their lonely cell, and inevitably end up in front of his seal. First, he'd only glare at him in silence- thankfully, the chains used to restrain him had been thoroughly annihilated by the seal he'd used to break out in the first place, so there was that small mercy.

Eventually, he would do nothing but trade bitter words with him- and even as his hatred flared brightly, in the cell there was nothing to destabilize him. Nothing to make him draw on Shukaku's chakra.

Shukaku didn't taunt him with memories of the dead monks. Bunpuku never failed to bring it up himself, after all.

He wondered what his father would have thought of him, now-chained and trapped beneath the earth, petty murderer, his greatest

sealings unable to save him. He swore, if he ever got out of this, he'd design enough anti-jinchuuriki contingencies to replace the sand in the desert.

What really made the second year terrible though, was when he was struck that he was sealed in *Bunpuku* . He'd known that- obviously- and he'd even tangentially known that he was a character from the series. In his single minded focus to *be free* , he'd not processed that Bunpuku's presence meant that *cannon was happening* .

Cannon was happening, and he was stuck underground, bound within a useless priest's chakra coils as all his long-laid plans went to waste. He seethed at that, for months attempting in futile rage to break through the seal.

For four years after that, neither of them deigned to talk to the other.

"Do you regret it?" It was an odd start to an odd conversation, after all this time in silence. A tired, gaunt looking Bunpuku dropped into the seal, leaning wearily against the sluice gate separating them.

Yes. "No. I've lived a long time, and there's some things I just don't regret anymore." He did. Perhaps he was being petulant, but he didn't *want* to talk to Bunpuku. The priest had made his position clear.

The monk stood, looking for a second thoughtful- "ah, but then there was, at one time…" Shukaku twitched, but Bunpuku only walked away.

They didn't speak again for more than a year.

Gaunt circles had etched themselves deeply beneath his eyes the next time he talked, and his mental avatar had streaks on his cheeks, like tears- "I wonder if I've gone insane- willing to give my

life to oppose you, once, and now, coming just to hear a voice. They've forgotten us, haven't they?"

Shukaku nodded hesitantly. "Humans always like to forget what they can't understand."

"I will not release you." Still resolute, but weary. "Even if they've forgotten, I still have my duty…" and to that, Shukaku could only nod.

Another few months passed in lonely- calm- silence before Bunpuku returned to the seal-space, tear-streaks gone from his face yet all the more gaunt. The faint edge of his ribs peeked out from beneath a loose, ragged shirt, and eyes that felt totally at peace with themselves looked to his own. "Do you remember… back when you first spoke to me outside this hell? There was this geezer monk giving me a sermon about love, and you said I hadn't given *you* any."

"Vaguely. Why bring it up now?"

"Ha… I was just wondering." He sighed, looking more and more like the trapped old man his memories reminded him of. Time was slipping through his fingers… "you're the only person I can speak to, these days. Sometimes, I wonder… will you tell me why?"

"Why *what* ?"

"Why did you kill those monks? I find myself repeating the last words you spoke to me before the rampage over and over again… you apologized. Why?"

Shukaku stretched out languidly, quicksand gripping at his form as it pulled him down. "...you killed them." He held up a hand to forestall the fury on Bunpuku's face. "Unwillingly. Will you listen to the truth?"

"...yes."

Shukaku sighed in weary quietude, wondering how he'd come to tell this story to a man he still somewhat hated. First among the siblings to do so… he'd have to hold that over Gyuki in the future, whenever he got around to making friends with B. "Once, the nine bijuu were part of the Juubi. *That* was a true demon, its rage unending and its evil uncompromising. We inherited none of its mind, but its taint still remains in our chakra- toxic to anyone but us."

"That rage… then." Bunpuku blinked, then straightened- looking for just a single moment sorrowful, as strong as he'd seen him with seven gates open, willing to face down a demon even to his death. "You never meant to kill them. That was what you meant when you accused *me* of killing them-" he asked, again: "do you regret it?"

This time, Shukaku responded with the truth. " *Yes* ."

"You wanted to be free."

Shukaku nodded. These days, he found the monk's presence… tolerable. It was certainly a deviation from the normal monotony of the barren quicksand of his seal-space, or the blank, cold cell Bunpuku stared at every day, all day. "You've grown wiser in your age."

"I'm not that old, idiot tanuki." It wasn't even that biting anymore. "I suppose I don't even need to ask why you'd want to be free…"

"Ask a different question, then." Bunpuku blinked in surprise, and Shukaku frowned in slight consternation. He must have been getting too used to his conversations with the bald man if he was responding back like that.

Bunpuku recovered his composure remarkably quickly, struggling to stand despite the emancipation that'd long since marched across his body. "Then… then, why did you make your labyrinth? I always wondered why you'd make a place so… cruel."

Shukaku chuckled softly at the thought. He supposed it *could* be considered cruel, with the amount of traps he'd stuffed in it. "Well, it started with a place to call home…"

This time, it was Shukaku who called out to the priest, waiting patiently for him to appear in the seal a few hours later. The man didn't even bother standing, instead slumping bonelessly against the metal grate in weary exhaustion. "Hello, Ichibi."

"Shukaku. My name is Shukaku."

"You won't live long."

Bunpuku coughed softly, glancing up weakly to meet Shukaku's burning- *concerned* gaze. "I was never meant to live forever, Shukaku… this is only a step sooner on a path I've been long waiting. This darkness does not much suit me."

"They'll seal me away into someone else."

"You're… a kind soul." Another set of coughs racked his weary body, interrupting his speech. "One day, Shukaku, you'll find a jinchuuriki able to truly love you for who you are. Trust…"

"No." Bunpuku looked up, concern written into the emancipated lines that clung to his face. "I don't have to let you *die* . We can live- *you* can live. We can get out of this, together."

"A pointless endeavor. We're locked a mile beneath the ground- and I will die regardless."

Shukaku's grin was manic- *desperate* . "I'm the greatest fuunjutsu master alive. If it's possible, then I can *do it* ."

A long moment passed as Bunpuku considered his offer, quiet. "If you swear not to seek revenge against the monks who bound you,

then I'll release you when it comes time for the sealing." His laugh shuddered to ragged coughing, his grin melancholic. "Look at us, once enemies… that geezer was right. It's astonishing what a little empathy can do."

Shukaku held out his fist to the dying man, and, hesitantly, Bunpuku met it with his own.

They *knew* each other, for a single moment-

They knew resolve.

They swept in while Bunpuku was asleep one night, cloaked figures obscured beneath the billowing cloth draped over indistinct forms, the strength of their chakra- and how different it felt to the resolute peace of the monks- marking them as shinobi. It felt… sharp- somewhat bitter, and an entirely different sort of calm to Bunpuku's quiet acceptance.

It was the calm of someone who would do anything for little to no reason at all. A floating detachment from humanity itself. They carried him through dark corridors and ever-descending staircases, the groan of shifting earth just faintly audible far below them as someone *wrenched* open the earth.

Not even the deepest basements of the wind temple were secure enough for this, evidently. Shukaku watched in wry amusement as they brought the priest to an immense chamber carved out of the wind-country bedrock, far enough below the ground that they might even be nearing the level of his grand seal.

A pillar of stone rumbled up from the ground beneath them- an altar, Shukaku realized. Off to the side, another, smaller altar was pulled from the ground. Then they put a teapot on it, and Shukaku couldn't help but *laugh* .

The sharp sound woke the lethargic Bunpuku, who merely quietly opened his eyes to a seal-scape trapped in the depths of his mind, to a dark stone room surrounded by shinobi painting seals across the floor that Shukaku analyzed and deciphered in the moment they appeared. “ *Is it time?* ” The question, directed to him alone, nevertheless alerted one of the shinobi to his wakefulness. A sensor, then.

“ *Almost* .” The sensor looked at Bunpuku strangely before returning to the seal they were drawing on the floor. “ *Watch as they take their spots*- ” they surrounded them in a staggered circle, like some ritual to summon a demon- well, he supposed that was what they were doing, more or less. “ *-and use the key* .”

All the characters in his seal flashed red simultaneously, then crumbled, even as an invisible chain tried to reach in and *grab* him-

In an instant, a billowing cloak of sand burst out of Bunpuku’s tensed form, twisting into a perfect counterseal for the matrix written on the floor around them. Even better, half of the shinobi failed to recognize the enemy fuuinjutsu and kept channeling chakra into their own, destabilizing it… explosively.

The room shuddered at the force of the blast, and burned stiflingly hot at the chakra cloak that billowed off Bunpuku’s form. The old monk sat up- slowly at first then with a lithe exuberance that Shukaku hadn't seen for *years* . “I feel… alive.” He laughed, a bright, cheerful sound even as the tail of his cloak smashed the teapot to pieces. “Quick, Shukaku, before they regroup- unseal yourself!”

“ *As if I’d leave without you* .” The sand formatted itself into a truly dizzying fuuinjutsu, intricate lines crawling up the side of the wall in insane ramblings, geometric inconsistencies and a giddying rush of chakra through the old priest’s coils- it lit up in golden-brown, bluish white incandescence, shining bright for a single moment as the chakra focused *just below their feet*-

Space tore-

The room exploded behind them as they collapsed to the sand a thousand miles away, a brilliant blue sky hovering above them. “ *Now we have to rebuild the seal-”*

“No… no, I’ve held you long enough, Shukaku.” The faint opposition of his will broke his hold over the sand, preventing him from forming the delicate fuuinjutsu he’d need to reseal himself into the priest. “I know… can feel it, as we lay here together… you had a plan. You are more than even I know- I’ve felt it, in the way you agonize over the passing of time. There is something you want, truly want… don’t let me get in the way of it.”

“ *We- you could do it with me-”*

“No… no, I’m old, and weary, and broken. Go, Shukaku. Go and live…” He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them it was to a quiet gaze staring at the burning sun so far above, a tear at the edge of brightness… “thank you, Shukaku, for letting me see the sun… one last time.”

Bunpuku died with a smile on his face, as kind as he’d ever been to the *original* Shukaku- and Shukaku cursed the wastefulness of it all.

Much like with Gamamaru I tried to reimagine Bunpuku's character- at first he's very similar to the other jinchuuriki who hate/resent their bijuu, but after the the incident and getting locked away for a bunch of time he gets perspective on what Shukaku feels and develops to the more sagely character he's supposed to be. Original Shukaku would have still hated him- and have been unable to leave the wind temple even if they didn't, but SI Shukaku has overly complicated teleportation seals + perspective on humans not being the worst thing since Zetsu, so they get along much better.

Shukaku (getting sealed): I did not plan for this :L

The Two Gods

Chapter 13: The Two Gods

It wasn’t yet time- but he let himself mourn for future tragedies as he watched changes ripple across the sand that watched all things within its omniscient eye.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Shukaku buried Bunpuku in the heart of his labyrinth on the highest rocky crag, a small obituary etched into rock in perfect kanji. To all those who made it to the center of his domain- those who cared to look, this was his last and final gift to the man he’d come to call his friend. It read- Bunpuku. *The man who overcame hate* .

He layered the grave in a hundred invisible barriers etched into the stone in patterns across monoliths hidden in non-euclidean space- even a bijuudama would splash off harmlessly when he finished with his work.

Once, one last time, he just sat beside the grave and remembered all the people he’d lost.

Then, he made contingencies. First, he scribed a complicated space-time matrix into the grand seal’s hall that would ping him with a bit of chakra every time a group of shinobi- or anyone particularly powerful- approached him. He’d *never* be caught unaware of an ambush again, not if he could help it.

Second, he slipped in an extra few seals into the display to fix the… glitch… around the wind temple. The eight gates were an absolute *annoyance* , and he didn’t want to deal with those wind temple fanatics again for as long as he lived.

Third, he reached out with the furthest extent of his earth chakra and *grabbed* the silicon oxide from the sand, melding it together until it formed a small, unnervingly perfect glass spike not even four inches long. Then, for almost a year he painstakingly inscribed a three-dimensional matrix onto it in perfect miniature- a space-time seal to take him to random, specific location in the barren deserts of wind country.

How Minato mass produced a teleportation seal that teleported *only* himself, Shukaku didn't think he'd ever know. His already immense respect for the man- who'd figured it out in his less than twenty years of life, only grew as he just *barely* escaped messing up one of his seal's molecularly thin lines.

Tanuki script could be useful, but sometimes he wished it was as concise as the Uzumaki's bastardized sealing.

Eventually, though, the glass spike was finished, reinforced until not even diamond would scratch its surface, and anything short of a gudodama- or maybe a particularly strong bijuudama- had a chance of shattering it. It glittered like a brilliant gemstone, the million faint lines he'd painstakingly carved into its light shimmering iridescent in the sunlight.

He would not be bound. *Not again* .

When he next bounded out of his warren, it was with his chakra folded inwards on itself and a henge layered across his form- it was unrecognizable to the world as a small tanuki.

There was business he needed to take care of.

Fire country was… trees. It was worse than Mount Myoboku- at least there they'd the decency to intersperse things with a couple of fantastically large mushrooms, immense fronds, and plenty of open lakes. It was better toward the edges, where farmland encroached

on the forests and the trees were only the *normal* size for several hundred year-old arboreal growth.

As he delved deeper into the land of fire the growth became… strange. Immense trunks which shot from the ground, thickets of huge roots, entire groves of trees that hummed with natural chakra and something *more* . The forests were cloying with that *chakra* , pressing like a forgotten memory against Shukaku's own.

Once, Shukaku hid himself in a massive, abandoned grove of trees and in his natural size for a few just a few moments, taste the natural chakra as it swam through his own- so perfectly energetic, vibrant and infinitely *alive* .

He recognized that chakra, and the memories it brought.

If there was any question that Hashirama was already alive, then the everpresent taint of Asura's chakra over the land of fire dispelled that- and that meant *Madara* was alive. Shukaku shivered faintly at his memories of what the man would do- if he had a choice, he'd never meet him.

It wouldn't even be necessary.

He crept through the undergrowth in his henged size, laughing softly to himself whenever a wild animal tried- and failed, spectacularly- to attack the tanuki that marched brazenly through the forest. Watching a tiger try to bite his throat only to get a mouthful of sand was somewhat amusing. The journey took much, *much* longer, as small as he was- only the speed-enhancing properties of chakra saving him from just abandoning subtlety altogether.

So sue him, jumping from branch to branch got tiring really quickly, especially henged as something with such an acute lack of opposable thumbs.

Close as it was to the border of wind country, the Uchiha compound was the first one he saw- imposing wooden walls resolutely denying

entry from where it sat bunched together on the top of a small hill, surrounded by farmlands and leagues of empty, burned forest. From his guarded vantage in one of the nearby oaks he could see the Uchiha guards as they stared attentively out toward the vast openness of the land around them- stoically still, even if that was the only feature he could really distinguish from as far away as he was.

If Hashirama was powerful enough to be growing forests already, then Madara… it was possible he already had his Mangekyou. Tamping down the faint memories of *swirling, ever bleeding*- that echoed as he thought of Indra's eyes, he fled back into the forest of fire country. If he ever had to interact with the Uchiha clan again, then it'd be too soon.

As though he'd be that lucky.

It was almost a week's journey across fire country to the Senju compound at his current size, and the two couldn't be more different. Where the Uchiha compound had held back the forests with almost religious fervor, the Senju lived amongst the trees. Vast oaks hung over every building, the compound itself almost missable with how seamlessly it blended into the verdant green around it- even the houses were subtly intertwined with the undergrowth. Almost as though they'd *grown* that way.

Even a hundred feet out from the border of the compound he could taste Asura's chakra thick in every plant, fierce and gentle, kind and *angry* as the wood responded to its call. It soothed him, at the edge of his consciousness- the innate nature of the Juubi's taint that spoke of wood being *its domain*, its endless desire- the faint blank spot in its chakra where infinite hunger had once reigned supreme.

He crept slowly through the forest floor, neatly avoiding shinobi patrol where he could sense them and deftly following the shadows of forest's dominion through the spaces where humans eyes glossed over- walking with the skittish bumble of a wild animal. Even as they saw him, the Senju dismissed his presence as irrelevant.

The chakra- *Asura's* chakra- was strongest at a simple, if elaborate large, house nestled in the crook of a deep wood at the edge of a stream bordering the edge of a compound. Were it not for the almost oppressive atmosphere pressing down on everything in the vicinity, the glade would have been a pleasant place- open and verdant with grass and bushes, bespeckled with a carpet of flowers- like so many stars… It was beautiful, and in the face of that *chakra* , the only things he could think of were old memories, pain, and the crushing grip of wood release as it *broke* him to death.

Tucking himself under a few ferns, he settled to wait. The chakra shifted and moved in unpredictable patterns, whirling with the wind- rising with the sun as it inched towards noon, warming as the poppies opened and clenching in all-encompassing sadness at the randomest moments. As the sun reached its zenith, two men stepped from into the glen, Asura's chakra burbling in faint agitation.

One, older- armor clad neatly to his form, sword strapped across his back. He carried himself with a complete *disinterest* - a self-confidence chiseled into his cool demeanor- and a slight limp in his right leg.

The second of the two was younger- probably not more than sixteen, nervous determination written clearly across his face. He had the *ugliest* bowl-cut hair that Shukaku'd ever had the misfortune of seeing- and a chakra larger than any human he'd felt since his father's time.

Senju Hashirama, he thought in an instant. That was all he'd come here for- to find *where* exactly he was in cannon.

They made a seal- then the clearing exploded into motion. It was clearly a spar- for all the immense strength of the combatants neither of them went for killing blows- yet *strong* would be almost an underestimation as to the fearsome waves of chakra roiling through the clearing.

Content with what he'd seen, Shukaku bounded neatly into one of the trees and out into the forests surrounding the Senju compound. He knew- more or less- *when* he was- with Butsuma still alive he had some time still until the founding of Konohagakure, and even then some time until the first thing he dared to change-

A kunai *slammed* into the branch beside him, startling him into a defensive crouch as a *startlingly* small shinobi landed neatly on the branch in front of him. "Hello, *infiltrator* ." Ah- white hair, generally looking just around twelve, definitely part of the clan- Senju Tobirama stared down at him with barely concealed contempt. "You're not somewhere you're meant to be."

Shukaku just snuffed a particularly uninteresting whorl on the wood, trying his best to act normal. Well, normal for a Tanuki.

He failed. Tobirama narrowed his eyes, carefully palming another kunai. "You *look* like a tanuki… but, the density of your chakra gives it away. It's the densest thing I've ever felt." Trust *Tobirama* to sense him even when his chakra was tucked in on itself one too many times to count. "I'm afraid you've seen dangerous clan secrets, sir tanuki. I cannot let you leave this place alive." *What* clan secrets? Shukaku was fairly certain he'd only seen a routine training session between Butsuma and Hashirama-

A kunai slashed through where he'd been but moments before and the *snap* of his chakra against the wood as he leapt away cast entire flocks of startled birds into the air. Rapidly dodging a wave of shuriken, Shukaku desperately thought back to what was so important as to get *this - oh* . Butsuma's limp. That was probably something-

A *tidal wave* of water formed out of nothing- or from the moisture in the air, as he doubted anyone but his brothers would have been able to make that much out of chakra- before roaring down at him, forcing Shukaku to draw on his chakra for the first time in their fight. Sand flickered into a simple seal and an angled pink barrier flashed into

existence in front of them. The wave struck, and parted with the crash of water on *denial* .

Shukaku erased the barrier with a flick of intent, then channeled chakra into the glass spike embedded in his chest. This had gone on long enough- he *really* didn't want to jeopardize the future-

A root wrapped around his chest just as the spike burned brilliant white with the force of his chakra, faintly visible even through the sand of his chest. "Hey! Bully! Don't you dare *hurt my brother*- "

The chakra in the seal finished its inevitable path, and space warped, *tore* open beneath them in a jagged seam as *here* and *there* collided with crushing force and the universe permitted for a single long moment the impossible spatial distortion that hovered hazily around their form in perfect defense before gravity asserted its dominion over both of them and they *fell* .

Shukaku landed with a crash on the sands of wind country, and one *Senju Hashirama* landed beside him in a poof of dust and a pained groan. He *had* set the terminus point of the portal rather high in the air, hadn't he?

His second thought was that he'd already gone and thoroughly damaged the continuity of cannon he was relying on so fiercely. His third thought was *dodge*- a small forest of roots erupted from the ground around him with beguiling quickness, darting out toward him as he barely managed to leap away from them.

Senju Hashirama pushed himself into a standing position, glaring at Shukaku with *legitimate killing intent* dripping off his form. "Hey! This isn't the tanuki realm! What'd you do to us!"

"We're in wind-"

"Great!" He wrung his hands- almost nervously, but the furious wave of chakra was anything *but.* "Then I can get rid of a problem and go

home! Tobi's gonna be all relieved, and like- not nag me. Wood release: *naivety of a world of trees!* " And the whole desert erupted into forest.

Cursing warring-clans era paranoia, and cursing for not the first time Asura's idiocy- he should have had the decency to die a *normal* death, and not be reincarnated a bunch of times- Shukaku summoned the most intense sandstorm around him, calling on the wind to slice the trees in the moments of its obscuring opacity.

When the sandstorm faded he stood tall enough to tower over mountains. Hashirama looked up at him with a distinctly nervous laugh. "Uh, I…" he flicked through a set of hand seals, and the forest came to life in sudden movement. "Earth release: morass. Water release: water dragon bullet-" the two jutsu collided in a spray of cloying mud and mist, barely holding back a wave of sand that rose up in an instant to block them. "Cut me some slack! I wasn't expecting the *Ichibi!* I'm not gonna give up, though! You're as good as *dead!* "

There were a lot of ways Shukaku could kill Hashirama in that moment. A high powered explosive seal formed directly beneath his feet would have done it, and a bijuudama or even amenomihashira would have been overkill for the threat. He was *powerful* , but against his future self that could defeat even Madara, a complete body: susanoo, and Kurama simultaneously- he was little but a child.

It would have been easy to kill him, but he didn't *want* to. A flex of his will saw a scarlet bright barrier shear through the sands around him, blocking the thicket of trees that furiously clawed at its impermeable form- buying him a few seconds of time. If accidentally teleporting Hashirama to wind country had derailed the future, then *killing* him would be as good as throwing all his plans into the sun.

The barrier held resolute- but the trees grew *over* it, roots extending over a thousand feet high and cascading down towards him.

Being the size of a mountain was certainly annoying when it came to dodging, but as Shukaku let the barrier collapse and blasted away Hashirama's wood release with a monumentally powerful gust of air, he remembered the *benefits* .

Shukaku met the Senju's eyes, blinked as the energies settled- and when he opened them again the human's dark brown met pools of *fathomless gold* . The very air around him grew chokingly heavy- the world resonating with his power twice over and *judging*- an intent as fathomless as the desert itself. When he moved, despite his size, everything just felt *slow* . A twitch to the right, a simple dodge, a sweep of his tail and forests of trees were shattered in an instant.

"Wood release: wood spear-" Hashirama barely managed to complete the hand seals before Shukaku was upon him, tail slamming to the ground beside him as a chakra-restraining seal clung heavily to his skin, disrupting the technique. The forest fell still. "Why- hey, hey- let me go! You're not going to do-"

"You do not belong here." If the way Hashirama paled at his voice was any indication, his killing intent while in sage mode was impressive indeed. "Return." The desert around him shifted, just a bit, lines drawing themselves in glittering blue as an immense seal built itself up over the course of a minute-

The sky and sand tore open in opalescent lines, and then Hashirama was gone.

Shukaku slumped in exhaustion as natural energy fled him, amidst a sea of trees that called out to him in plying whispers, of eternity long past, over all things a flower, and a dream. Even against an inexperienced wood release user, that had been *exhausting* .

He turned away from the battle and fled back into the desert. Simple reconnaissance- *right* . He was never going to underestimate canon characters *ever again* . Tobirama's sensing ability was just as ridiculously powerful as advertised.

The desert winds swept up, in a furious storm, and when they died down only a small tanuki remained to dart away into the rolling dunes.

Somewhere above the Senju compound one Senju Hashirama, several gnarled trees, and an excessive amount of sand fell out of a hole in the sky.

Deep beneath the earth, surrounded by uncountable barriers and a detection seal that even Zetsu shouldn't be able to slip past- the size of wind, but that was immaterial- Shukaku stared at the display of his grand seal and saw a story unfold.

It wasn't yet time- but he let himself mourn for future tragedies as he watched changes ripple across the sand that watched all things within its omniscient eye. Hashirama's trees slowly withered, yet their presence stuck out against the map in like streaks of vibrancy, even as they died.

A monumentally powerful Uchiha nin- so he could gather from the faint slick across their chakra, the little echo of something *more* that marked them- so he could tell from how much it felt like Indra- visited a clan in wind country. Two weeks later, the clan followed him back to the land of fire.

As he waited, he practiced the chakra folding technique and his fuuinjutsu, watching- waiting for the result of his blunder.

Some years later, the wind clan- battered, reduced by half, and with a single member vastly more powerful than the others, returned to wind country. Over the next few years, several of the clans scattered around wind country flocked to their location, interspersed by intense battles amidst the dunes.

Once, an enemy clan tried to retreat into his labyrinth. Shukaku just chuckled as they disappeared off the grand seal, one by one, before

returning back to the technique he'd been practicing. There was no reason for it to be *this* hard…

The months bled together in endless conflict, and soon even the most nomadic clans had begun to settle down in a single location, hidden in a rocky canyon somewhere in the rough east of wind country. Shukaku reached out with his sand and etched a single character above it in delicate script-

He inscribed an hourglass, and called the collection of clans Sunagakure.

He called the man who'd brought them together *Kazekage.*

Some time after that, a battle a thousand times greater than anything he'd felt since Indra and Asura last clashed *flared* in the distance- a furious, boiling chakra that saturated all of nature, a faint haze of sand that hovered over the edges of his map. For a long night he sat in sage mode, senses feeling a terrible battle at the edge of of his range-

Indra's chakra disappeared.

Kurama's flared, then was snuffed out and bound, his mind inaccessible even in the shared mindscape.

Alone, Asura's chakra remained, and Shukaku internally named him *Hokage* .

Grimly determined, Shukaku twisted his chakra *this* way- that, and finally *there* , folding it over and over itself, and manifesting the form he'd spent so long working on- Shukaku left his the hall at the center of his labyrinth in the perfect disguise.

Ootsutsuki Shukaku left the desert's heart *human* .

Shukaku: don't mind me, I'm just here to check where I am in the timeline-

Tobirama: Why hello there

The Whims of Lone Gods

Chapter 14: The Whims of Lone Gods

The Kazekage nodded in agreement. “You can see why I don’t think the Ichibi will be as… capturable as the rest. Either it’s in its labyrinth- and I’d recommend seeing a Yamanaka- you have those, right? If you think you can get into there- or it’s anywhere else, small enough to hide under a tree- or something. Who knows where it could be?”

Shukaku barely restrained a smirk from where he was standing- mere feet behind the Kazekage. Where indeed…

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Humanity… such an ephemeral concept. Shukaku wasn’t human, even now with his chakra tucked and bound, twisted into humanity’s visage- the beating light of the sun didn’t sear his pale skin, his being yet cast of chakra and sand instead of flesh and blood. He still didn’t have the same chakra coils of a human- not that anyone could tell against the boundless density of it all, and hand seals were worse than useless. It felt distinctly unnatural. Shukaku had been, *still was* a bijuu.

He’d spent long years mastering the henge, making sure he wouldn’t embarrass himself by dropping on all fours when he needed to run away- making sure that it *fit* him. With the echoes of natural chakra flitting against his own, the memories of the soul, he’d built a form. Or- rather, a form had built itself for him.

Kneeling to stare into the pane of glass baked onto the sands of his labyrinth, he gently rubbed against the two short horns that poked from his forehead, the ones that reminded him so much of his

father… Dirty blond hair from- a time long past, a world gone- and his same golden eyes, cross-shaped pupils staring back at him.

They were going to think he had a dojutsu, wouldn't they? Sighing, he shattered the sand with a flex of his chakra, absentmindedly adjusting the- fake, as much sand as the rest of him- robe hanging off his back. Places to go, people to speak to…

He pushed chakra into his legs and bounded across the labyrinth's walls, sand scouring the seals from beneath him as he ran and replacing them twice over behind him. It was almost fun- shunshining from outcropping to outcropping, trying to take his mind off how *unnatural* the henge felt. Like a constant strain-

He wanted to be a tanuki, but for now human would have to do.

The horns were noticeable. He *liked* them, but they *did* draw attention wherever he went- he could see why his father always tended to wear his hood up when he could. They way stares just… slid off his form, quietly ignoring him like they never had before… it was almost uncomfortable to be able to blend into a crowd after so long as something *other* .

It felt *wrong* .

The small town on the wind-river country bustled vibrantly, yet still held onto the edge of sleepy ruralness that allowed a man to walk in one day and be greeted with friendly smiles and a wave. So long as he kept his hood up, the villagers were always willing to beg aid for whatever inane tasks they needed help with. Cows and crops, wagons and trade- he could imagine going mad, having to do such mundanity for days on end to *years* .

Not having to eat certainly solved a great many problems, except for when kind-hearted old folk decided he *really* needed to eat their food *right now* . It'd been *years* - he'd forgotten how to properly chew, and the old woman who'd given him the cookies had laughed at him.

Shukaku didn’t think he’d ever been more embarrassed for something so thoroughly stupid before.

Humming a soft tune the Sage’s wife had once sung to them so long ago, he carefully gathered up the sand in his palm, painstakingly separating the silicon oxide from the rest. It was actually a rather involved process, as far as things went- to just pick out the oxide at a molecular level would take far too long, so the process involved removing *most* of the impurities before filtering the rest through a series of simple seals. A final application of earth chakra-

“Ah, excuse me… shinobi, sir? Isn’t it a rather odd place to be practicing your… craft?” His targets had arrived, and he hadn’t even needed to look for them! *Perfect* . He let the filtration seals crumble to nothing more than regular sand, balancing the newly forged glass kunai- somewhat clumsily- in the palm of his hand. With him silent, the woman who’d stopped to question him leaned closer, clearly eyeing the kunai. “I’m not exactly sure *what* that was, but I’d like to ask you a few questions. For your safety, of course- the deserts are a dangerous place for an independant nin. Follow me, would you.”

Shukaku nodded, discreetly slipping the kunai into a storage seal and following the quad of bandaged shinobi out of the village proper, discreetly eyeing their hourglass-inscribed headbands. Hm… he’d gotten the symbol wrong on his seal- his was a bit too wide. They stopped beneath the shadow of a rocky crag, more than enough sand around them for anything he’d need to do.

Two of the shinobi darted off to hide in the shadows- as though that would prevent him from sensing them- even as kunoichi dropped the polite stance, leaning against one of the pillars with the subtle arrogance only the weak ever mastered. “So, here’s the deal. The Kazekage’s put out a decree to all wind country shinobi- get registered as a shinobi of Sunagakure, and move to the village. Those who oppose the will of the Kazekage are to be marked as missing nin.” Her smile was- cruel, but also bizarrely innocent. “You don’t want to be marked down as a missing nin, don’t you? We can do this easy, or hard.”

He was silent for a long moment as he spread his chakra through the soil- subtly usurping control of the iron sand mixed into the dunes beneath him, and inscribing a simple barrier seal around them. “Interesting.” One thing he hadn’t been able to change no matter the henge was his voice- crushingly deep and *unnatural* - echoing with undertones of powerful chakra. “I have a few questions for *you* .”

The two shinobi not hidden flinched at the sound. “We- we won’t answer the questions of a missing nin.”

“ *Shame* .” He extended his hand so casually, feeling seals upon seals stretching across the ground below. “Sand coffin. Seal.” The kunoichi leapt into a shunshin just moments after the barrier hummed to life around, a wave of sand binding the other shinobi in the instant longer it took them to react. “Well? I've heard humans value their time *living* .” His hood crumpled around his shoulders, twin horns gleaming sharp against the wind country sunlight.

“ *You* -” the kunoichi snarled as she palmed a kunai, gaze flickering warily to her comrades. “You must believe you’re the best thing ever with your fancy Uzushiogakure family behind you, but I’m not going to answer *nothing* to some whelp who can move a bit of sand-”

“I don’t think I like you.” A fraction of his killing intent leached into the air- ancient and indomitable, intricate, *precise* - indifferent. To kill them would be as simple as breathing, and twice as easy. “You *are going to tell me what I want* .”

“Yes! Yes yes- *please* don’t- what do you want to know?” The killing intent of a bijuu was a powerful thing indeed. “I don’t- don’t know much about the village, but I do know some!”

“Tell me about the relations between the Kage.”

She didn’t even bother looking confused, with how terrified of him she was. “Uh- good, I think! Sora- I mean, Kazekage-sama *hates* the Hokage, because the Sabaku were allied with the Uchiha during the

clan wars- um. The Tsuchikage keeps trying to free Fang- but there's peace, and everyone's meeting up for a summit in iron country-"

"Thanks- that's enough. You never saw me." He pressed a line of sand into her skin, perhaps a little more painfully than necessary, and drew a small seal against her bone. "So long as you remain in wind country, I will know *exactly* where you are at all times."

"You're- you're lying-" her eyes were wide with fear though, and the faint shivering from his killing intent had only increased. As it went, he *was* telling the truth- the seal pinged off his grand seal, and would highlight her on the central map- but it was simply so outlandish a proposition that she dismissed it immediately as a psychological attack.

Still, he got what he needed to know, and didn't even have to kill any humans while he was at it! He strode neatly through the barrier, leaving the Suna nin bound within his sand as he slipped away- notorious missing nin Shukaku, without a speck of blood on his hands.

Right. Totally.

He whistled a jaunty tune as he shunshined away across the desert sands, happy that human lips were so *good* at this weird thing…

Iron country was… very cold. Even with a bijuu's rather skewed sense of temperature, he could feel the bitter bite of a chill northern breeze that wrapped around every snow-weary bough and vast white plain, could see the glaciers hang menacing in the mountain valleys. It was hard to believe only a few centuries ago iron country had been the heart of a unified continent.

Walking through the drifting flurries with a group of humans significantly *more* susceptible to cold than he was, he couldn't really see the appeal of the place. Wind country was significantly better, so

long as there were a tremendously large amount of seals to dissuade *curious* shinobi…

On second thought, living in a place nobody wanted to come to sounded a bit like paradise.

As they trudged wearily into another valley, a samurai just… *appeared* out of a snowdrift, sword held in an easy grip before him. “Shinobi. If you would, please state your purpose in visiting the iron country.”

“The five Kage summit. I’ve come here to attend.” The other shinobi more or less repeated the same thing Shukaku said- small contingents of shinobi from each country had been invited to… support… either their kage during the main negotiations, or represent their village in front of the others. The samurai simply assumed he was one of those.

Shame on them for assuming stuff- *attending* was something he’d take very literally.

As they marched further into iron country the tree cover died down, patchier by the day- and the mountainous landscape became more and more treacherous, vast ravines and shattered boulders littering the ground for seemingly no reason. Of all the visiting nin, only Shukaku saw them as the aftereffects of Kurama’s rage- shattered mountains and an earth carved asunder beneath the force of his tails.

It was a truly frightening power to imagine, even if *he* held something similar. Perhaps even more, with his sealing mastery. Seeing the devastation around him, he supposed their reputation as living, walking natural disasters had to have come from *somewhere* .

Pulling his cloak of sand tight around himself, he tried to ignore the cold… iron country was *really* , really cold…

The future was laid out before them, so tenuous- balanced on a kunai’s blade.

The five Kage summit was a step forward for peace- but Shukaku knew better- it was merely the prelude to a dream, a dream called *war* .

Standing outside of the cold fortress, its ancient stone jutting up from the clawing grasp of creeping ice, Shukaku felt like a *fool* . He’d spent months carefully making the seal he’d use to spy on the summit, only for *every other minor village* to plan the same exact thing, except with somewhere along the lines of half a million times less subtlety. He’d been worried about his small, one-way portal being discovered by a sage-mode Hashirama, and these other villages were hiding shinobi in the rafters.

Finding out that spying was tacitly allowed made him want to pull his tail apart in frustration. His seal had been *useless* , and with only a few vague platitudes- he somewhat suspected the sheer *depth* of his chakra had something to do with how quickly they allowed him in- he found himself standing mere *feet* behind the Kazekage.

They just didn’t *care* . Things certainly must have changed between now and the future five Kage summit, if their security was lax enough to allow a *bijuu* within feet of the Kage. Idiotic, the lot of them, making him stress over nothing. So long as nothing went wrong… he nervously fingered the pendant on his necklace- a small, four inch glass spike.

The last of the Kage to arrive was Senju Hashirama, who, somewhat predictably, was almost bouncing with excitement by the time he got to his chair. It was almost like looking at a mirror image of Asura, was it not for how *forced* the cheer obviously was. By the way the other Kage glanced at him with either looks of soft disdain, fearful awe, or both, it was clearly *working* , though. “So, everybody's here! Great, five Kage summit, go!”

The Kazekage glared at Hashirama impressively hard for not releasing a single drop of killing intent. “We’re not here to play your *games* , Hashirama. We’re here to discuss important matters. Like how Konoha and Iwa keep trying to *steal* fang country and the land of rivers from wind.”

Hashirama waved his hand, fiddling with a piece of wood carved into a… really bad fox. It had nine tails, though. “Eh, that’s… interesting. Aren’t you sure fang *country* would like to have a say in this? I’m sure their representative is around here *somewhere* …”

“Unfortunately, some unfortunate events prevented them from making it here today.” Shukaku bit the inside of his lips to keep from laughing at how *dryly* the information had been delivered. He could agree wholeheartedly- a crowd of hostile shinobi often *did* count as an unfortunate event.

The Tsuchikage snarled, chakra humming in a spike of killing intent as he snapped his fist down onto the table. “That’s *total-* ”

“Order, please.” The samurai leading the proceedings hadn’t moved an inch, but an aura of almost palpable calm weighed heavy on the room. Shukaku blinked as the chakra touched his own and intermingled- a ninshu of some sort. *Interesting* . “This forum is no place for rowdy behavior. Please, continue.”

The Tsuchikage breathed deeply, stiffening in his chair. “As I was saying, fang country’s absence from these proceedings is *clearly* a ploy against the other nations-”

“The vassal countries of wind need not be present-”

“You *wish* that was how they viewed themselves-”

“Hey! Everyone!” The argument between the two froze in an instant as they looked at Hashirama, whose grin was almost blinding in its intensity- even as the wooden figurine in his hands had bulged and

distorted into a grotesque figure of thorns and pink blooms. “There’s no need to argue, *is there* ? We’re here for *peace* , not anger.”

“Listen to your god talk, then we can go and kill each other another day.” All three of the other Kage- except Hashirama, who was still pretending to be oblivious- turned their glares on the Mizukage. “Well? We’re here to discuss a peace treaty, and, to be perfectly frank, both the land of rivers and fang country are unimportant.”

Hashirama nodded, placing the- mysteriously un-wood released- figurine of Kurama on the tabletop. “Couldn’t have said it better myself. I have a proposition- a unique opportunity I’ve recently come across in regards to the bijuu.”

The Raikage scoffed. “Like what? Throw them at each other, yo? I’m sure that’s all and super peaceful. Or, maybe *another* agreement not to poke the hornet’s nest and get it like iron country?”

Perhaps Shukaku alone saw the glint in Hashirama’s eyes- the slight humor in his blank smile- amusement at the knowledge of exactly what he was going to say. He clasped his hands in a single seal, causing the kage to flinch back as the table’s wood shivered and split, coalescing into eight other wooden figurines. “In conjunction with my wife, one Uzumaki Mito, we developed a way to perfectly seal a bijuu within a human host. Mito here-” he nodded to the woman standing by his shoulder- “has contained the Kyuubi.”

The five Kage stared in some implacable mixture of awe and fear, jealousy engraved clearly into the echoes of their movements. Even the otherwise unbothered samurai mediator flinched back at the mention of the Kyuubi. The Kazekage was the first to regain his composure, his glare locked angrily on the Ichibi figurine. Shukaku didn’t think *any* of them were good likenesses of his siblings. “Is this a *threat* , Hashirama?”

“No no!” The Hokage waved his hands haphazardly through the air, grin yet brilliantly bright- “I was thinking, we could decide on a cool

peace treaty for everyone, then I'll give these to you all, and we'll be at peace! It's *perfect* !"

No, thought Shukaku- it was never going to work like that. Nevertheless, the Kage looked on in rapt attention at the mere possibility of getting their hands on one of his siblings. Most of the rest of the arguments over the treaty were banalities, beside a few of his general observations- Sunagakure *really* hated Konohagakure, just as much as it despised Iwagakure- mostly over some sort of land dispute with vassal countries he was *pretty* sure they hadn't had during cannon.

Kumogakure was… surprisingly mellow in their demands from what he'd been expecting. Hashirama was *Hashirama* , which translated to a never-ending litany of energetic but surprisingly well played politics, and Kiri just didn't care in the slightest.

Then it was time for them to argue over who got to enslave his siblings. It was an effort not to roll his eyes at how all the Kage lit up like kids in a candy shop, and an even *greater* effort not to bijuudama the whole place as they started bartering his *family* . Only the knowledge that throwing a bijuudama at the first five Kage would probably annihilate every single bit of his foreknowledge forestalled him.

Hashirama- slowly, with an almost impressive showmanship- split the bijuu figurines into several five piles. "The Kyuubi will stay with Konoha." The fox figurine clicked against the wood in front of him as he set it down. "Now the Hachibi and Nibi?"

"They both already live in cloud country, yo. Wouldn't be a stretch to give them to us, right?" Hashirama nodded in agreement with the Raikage, and slid the two figurines over to him. "Don't see why Ishikawa doesn't need to have the Gobi and Yonbi, either."

The Tsuchikage growled something incoherent at the decision being made for him, but accepted the two figurines easily enough. *Shukaku* clenched his fists, reminding himself in a mantra- do not

bijuudama the Kage. Do not adopt Kurama's methods and blow up iron country. *Do not bijuudama the Kage.* Seeing Kokuo's figurine being passed between them, made *not* doing so… very difficult.

The Kazekage frowned thoughtfully, before reaching out with his sand to scoop up two figurines. "Hm. We'll take the Nanabi and Sanbi-"

For the first time since the start of the summit the Mizukage reacted in anything other than blunt indifference. "That's eminently unfair. It's stupid, too- everyone else has been receiving pairs that balance each other- one powerful one not. Additionally, the Sanbi would be a terrible choice for *wind* country- Kirigakure demands the Sanbi and Rokubi."

"Would you have us take the *Ichibi* instead? I'm sorrowful to break the news-" he didn't sound sorrowful in the slightest. "Unfortunately, the Ichibi died in a sealing incident roughly twenty years ago."

Hashirama gave him a funny look. "Tailed beasts don't just die. They're… like, part of the universe." Shuaku narrowed his eyes slightly at that- he shouldn't have *known* that, and Kurama wouldn't have said anything… Asura's influence, he supposed. It must be. "Plus I, uh, totally fought the Ichibi *after* that- you remember the whole forest I grew in the desert?"

An echo of killing intent leaked from the Kazekage for a short moment. "Yes. Yes I *do in fact* remember that… abomination."

Hashirama nodded sheepishly. "Yeah, I was fighting the Ichibi after it snuck into our clan compound." He fiddled with his hands slightly, looking up imploringly at a face-palming Mito.

The other four Kage were giving Hashirama incredulous looks- even the Mizukage. The Tsuchikage was the one to voice what they were all thinking. "A bijuu. Snuck into the *Senju clan compound* … how exactly? They're *huge* !"

Hashirama huffed. “Well, it wasn’t that big when I first saw it. It was attacking Tobi, and then I was in wind country and we were having a huge battle! Then it banished me back to fire country.”

There was a long moment of silence before the samurai mediator finally decided to speak. “Bijuu… bijuu are ancient and unknowable powers. We may never know the full extent of their abilities.”

The Kazekage nodded in agreement. “You can see why I don’t think the Ichibi will be as… capturable as the rest. Either it’s in its labyrinth- and I’d recommend seeing a Yamanaka- you have those, right? If you think you can get into *there* - or it’s anywhere else, small enough to hide under a tree- or something. Who knows where it could be?”

Shukaku barely restrained a smirk from where he was standing- mere *feet* behind the Kazekage. Where *indeed* …

Hashirama smirked softly. “I’m sure I can get into this… labyrinth.”

The Kazekage glared at him. “You may be hailed as the god of shinobi, but I will enjoy celebrating your death at the hands of that awful place. Instead, how about monetary compensation-”

“How about a Sunaarashi? They’re basically Uzumaki, and we have an alliance with them- legends state they’re able to control the Ichibi with their sand release!” The Kazekage’s glare turned only icier at their mention.

“Absolutely *not* .” His killing intent seethed in the air between them. “I will not accept help from traitors to my clan and Sunagakure-”

“If I may.” Mito’s voice cut neatly through the Kazekage’s rage and the mediator’s call for order, a trickle of Kurama’s killing intent stunning the entire room to silence. “I doubt the Sunaarashi clan would willingly work against the bijuu. They hold them in high esteem- the Ichibi, especially, whomst they revere as an honored ancestor.”

“That’s complete nonsense-”

“Enough!” The samurai *finally* started to get the meeting back in order, but Shukaku couldn’t help but smile at the fact that even so many hundreds of years later, so long after her death- Okimi still stood beside him. It was an all too acute reminder of his father’s desire for humanity…

The five Kage summit came to a close with a multilateral nonaggression treaty, an angry Sunagakure with one less bijuu than the others and a promise from Hashirama to capture the bijuu- unknown to him, standing only feet to his right- if the opportunity presented itself, and the first words of war already traded.

Shukaku ducked neatly under a missing nin’s blade, the slash across his Konoha hitai-ate as jagged and furious as his fighting style. He hadn’t been *expecting* to come across Konoha defectors- given what he knew of their general non-existence in the future- but he supposed with the first great shinobi war in full swing then at least a few would decide to take their chances elsewhere.

A flash of clear kunai cut through the air, only a few even slicing through the edges of the nin’s skin as they dodged, ducking under a punch he threw out of a shunshin. “You’re… *awful* at this, horned-guy!” Shukaku ducked into a shunshin in an instant, but not before a kunai buried itself in his chest. “Hah!”

Frankly, Shukaku had to agree. His taijutsu was terrible as a human, and his ability handling weapons was even worse. Grimacing- in annoyance- he ripped the kunai out of his chest in a spray of sand and threw it to the ground beside him.

The missing nin blinked in shock. “Sand clone?”

“No. You see, I’m the Ichibi.”

Rolling his eyes, the shinobi chucked another few kunai his way with the haphazard aim that marked him as probably little better than genin-level. “Right, and I’m the Sage of Six Paths. You could have at least chosen a believable life.”

“Sorry. But, now that you heard that, you’re going to have to die.”

The nin barked out a biting laughter. “You’re even worse than me! As *if-”*

“ *Rasengan!* ” To make a long story short, he wasn’t laughing for very long. Brushing the splattered blood and viscera off his sand, he dully collected his shattered glass kunai with a scowl. He really *was* terrible at this- what good were his cool glass weapons if he kept fumbling them in combat? Shame on anyone who ever thought bijuu were good at everything.

He hadn’t come here to fight a random missing nin, though, the practice was certainly nice. There was something of a bit more interest to him.

The first war had written itself in the movements of shinobi- patterns and potentialities, the quiet movement of hidden divisions in looping paths in the empty desert, invisible to everyone but him and his grand seal. Shukaku had seen it all- the quiet preparation, the mad rush across the border into the land of rivers and through fang to the land of earth. He’d seen how everything just… blended together- shinobi from every nation running rampant through the others. When it came to the mobility of ninja, there *were* no hard lines of defense.

He’d seen small groups he split off from others, lone nin he’d believed ordered away on missions, only for them to hide themselves away in small desert towns and all the little quiet places. The amount of Suna nin who just… left was almost surprisingly high- but it made sense, he supposed, when they’d been forced into this in the first place.

A few had even tried to enter his labyrinth. Those he'd watched die in the popcorn flares of explosive seals and the hum of malicious barriers. None of them even made it to the more… esoteric traps further in.

The seal had even seen entire clans move- had traced those who defected, marked as *dangerous* the ones who snuck through into wind country only to be met far from Suna in fearsomely powerful battles- and the seal had seen *one more* .

It was why he'd left his safe labyrinth, trekked across the desert sands and fought incompetent missing nin- for family he'd do a lot of things. His eyes scanned the desert one last time- anxious, for all his resolute power- landing on a lightshow of flickering barriers and the flash of explosions.

For some reason, the Sunaarashi were *here*- in wind country, getting attacked by the *Shodai Tsuchikage* .

Shukaku let his henge fall apart, sand blooming beneath him in a wave as his true form swirled into being out of nothing; a furious howl of wind screamed around him as he kicked up a sandstorm, his approach a faint shadow and booming thunder.

He froze, a mile away from the furious battle, and-

Breathed.

He felt the flow of arid nature in the desert, the life that clung tenaciously to the wastes even after everything wind country had been through- felt all things, and in all things felt the power of life. Forty three- now forty two clansmen, their chakra all too easily reminiscent of Okimi's own- fought against a swarm of *thousands upon thousands* , small insects that sparkled with furious chakra in his mind's eye. Thousands, and a single man who shone like a single drop of sunlight-

He exhaled, and opened eyes like gold, letting the sandstorm disperse in eddies of drifting dust. “Ishikawa.” His voice shook, and nature shook in turn- “you’ve chosen the wrong clan to kill.”

“Ichibi.” A swarm of bees swept out towards him- but even as Tsuchikage, Ishikawa was no Senju Hashirama. A thousand needles of sand snapped into existence from the sand, sage mode making the impossibly hard task of spearing the insects from the sky almost *simple* . “I was not expecting your presence.”

The hum of his chakra coalesced in spinning majesty before him even as he wrote the most powerful barriers he could in the sand around the Sunaarashi clan. Natural chakra, wind, and the immense control to shape it all together- “Iwa won’t be needing your presence any longer.” Perhaps sensing the finality of that statement Ishikawa turned and fled, flying away at speed- but that only made the shot easier. “Wind release: amenomihashira!”

The sky exploded in endless infinities of annihilating wind.

It felt like an eternity- with sage mode he could feel the impossible powerful *awe* , the giddy happiness and *reverence* of the Sunaarashi as they watched the sky tear apart before them. He could feel the moment the Shodai Tsuchikage finally died.

It had almost been anticlimactic.

As the winds faded, Shukaku dropped the barrier to a desert leveled for almost a mile in every direction. “What are you doing in *wind* country? Were you not supposed to be in *Uzushiogakure* ?”

One of the trembling Sunaarashi stepped forward, prostrating themselves on the sand before him. “Venerable Ichibi, our clan… did not appreciate the Uzumaki’s desire to seal the bijuu, yet our pleas went unheard. We left the seas to find and free you- but you have clearly freed yourself, so we serve at your mercy.” Shukaku blinked, awkwardly staring at the… very earnest shinobi before him.

Reverence wasn't something he had much experience with… a thought- he began sketching out a seal in the still sand, carefully looping the impossibly complex fuuinjutsu he'd need to make a portal as big as he was planning. "Say… how about a place to lay low for the next few years?"

Space before them *tore*-

A rather oddly energetic merchant family of no particular renown moved into the land of waves during the tail end of the first shinobi war. They were a bit odd, but friendly enough-

In the end, nobody paid them much mind at all.

Shukaku sat on windswept dunes, beneath the sun and brilliant skies- so similar to a thousand years ago, so similar to what they'd be in the future for thousands of years to come, and pondered the infinite.

A wave of chakra washed over him from the battle in the distance, immense clouds of sand and wood, stone and crackling lightning interspersed with the brilliant white light of annihilation- it was coming to a close. The desert trembled against the sheer *might* of the battle being fought before him, cloudless sky bleeding- even the natural chakra that swept through his being was tainted with the memory of titans.

An age, an end- Shukaku watched three fight against one and barely inch towards victory. A spear of lightning the size of a mountain crashed into an immense statue of wood, as the Shodai Raikage stuck out, only to be dwarfed by a spear of brilliant white light- dust release, he knew in an instant as he sensed the complex interweave of chakra. A sea of trees washed across the desert in an instant, tangling with a wave of glittering metal sand, windstorms slicing through the branches only for the world of trees to march ever onwards.

Another blast of lightning. Fire- a creak of wood, and a monumental wooden statue stood between the three belligerent kage. “ *Sage art wood release,* ” whispered Shukaku in nostalgic memories of a truly terrible time- “ *true several thousand hands.* ” The statue’s back exploded in every direction, slamming, blow upon blow falling, against the Kazekage’s shield of sand. Shukaku *knew* what would happen- for all its strength, a defense of sand was *nothing* against a complete body: Susanoo.”

The first of the three belligerent Kage’s signatures was snuffed out with a blow of hands, the firsts of a shinobi’s deity.

The battle of four lone gods became the fight of three.

The Shodai Raikage was the second to fall as the forest, unrestrained by the sands beneath it grew in unrestrained verdancy, clambering over itself in a mad race to subsume its enemies. Bursts of lightning smashed through wave after wave of trees, but in the end even the electric brilliance of his most powerful techniques were swamped by the infinite wood.

Shukaku watched intently as the Hashirama and Mu battled in a dance of flowing forests and brilliant disintegration, elements clashing against each other in a fast-paced match of rock-paper-scissors as the two shinobi flipped through the five elements to gain an advantage over the other.

Even in sage mode, it was difficult to sense the Nidame Tsuchikage’s presence- and as Shukaku watched the mad crush of trees growing over themselves in unrestrained growth, it was evidently clear Hashirama was having much the same difficulty.

Another immense wood construct sprouted from the forest-

A lance of brilliant white light sheared through its head-

Asura’s chakra faded away, remnant only in the forest of trees that crawled across the shattered deserts. For a long moment the

Nidame Tsuchikage held himself in his state of near-nonexistence, before slumping onto one of the immense branches in exhaustion, eyes firmly locked into the distance.

He stared in Shukaku’s direction for a long moment, then sighed, closing his eyes in quiet sleep- lone survivor of a battle to end an age and conclude a war.

Shukaku turned away and strode into the vast emptiness of the desert’s embrace.

Shukaku (the author, really) speedruns early cannon, because it's really borning when you decide not to actually change anything :L

First shinobi war, and we already have a few minor divergences from cannon, mostly in the political sphere of things. Shukaku's blunder with Hashirama earlier sure did change stuff... Any guesses as to what?

This is the last chapter with passive Shukaku, I swear. We're getting into major events soon.

Family Matters

Chapter 15: Family Matters

He dropped neatly out of the air atop him, and even as his blades of metal and blood sunk into his arm, Shukaku stabbed the glass kunai into the man’s stomach. “One star seal: activate-” and he was bound.

The nin’s blades slipped free from his arms with the soft scrape of sand, and the shinobi laughed. “You’re dangerous- I should have known. They’d never send anyone normal to track down Asahi-sama. They’d send another monster.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Shukaku ran his finger down the flat of a glass katana, seals etching themselves across its form in gentle filigree, near invisible swirls folding inwards on themselves in intricate complexity. To anyone else alive, for all its strength, the blade would look half shattered beneath the intersecting inscriptions- but to Shukaku, it was an artwork. A key- a gift, made for a specific purpose. Rising from where he sat at the heart of his seal, sand shifting around him in patterns of omniscience, he slid the blade into its scabbard across her back.

The kunai slid into the brace along his side much the same, near invisible against white robes; impossibly sharp, impossibly durable with the seals that clung tightly to their form. The necklace was last of all, heavy where it hung- a simple cord of salvaged leather, tied around a four-inch long glass spike that spoke in whispers of salvation, and a tab of glass.

He felt the faint buzz of a familiar chakra- far away, yet within the omniscient eye of his greatest work, and knew that in this moment he would never be led astray.

Shukaku channeled chakra into the space-time seal around his neck, and stepped through the echo of nothing into the sunlight of a stricken desert. A glass tab hung around his neck, goal firmly tucked away within its embrace.

His grand work brought him to the edge of its eyes, but beyond that only the faint echo of familiar chakra in the tab let him know he was close. The shifting sands of wind country petered to breezy savannah over foothills, faint edges of verdancy creeping in at the edges of small streams until forests bloomed from the ground and the steep peaks of fang country carpeted the landscape like so many tears.

Hood thrown across his head, Shukaku wandered into the small border town nestled securely in one of the valleys, eyes warily tracing the shadows calm and even, as he ducked into a small, lonely inn. The door creaked softly at his entrance, alerting the inn's sole patron who flinched, deep in his sake and the innkeep carefully sweeping the floor in the back.

The tab of glass burnt against his senses, whispering-

"Hello." He nodded politely to the elderly woman with his broom before sitting down at one of the tables. Unfortunately, it would seem he'd have to partake in one of his least favorite activities- *eating.* "There was someone here, recently. I'm wondering if you could enlighten me on them."

The matron glanced around nervously before quickly returning to her sweeping. "Sorry, shinobi-san, but I'm not sure I remember everyone who comes through here." Too quick.

Her voice practically bled nervousness- it wouldn't take much to ask her about- *the man who made his glass burn in recognition* . "No matter- he was just causing a bit of trouble for some of the gambling halls, and racked up a fair bit of debt. I'm just here to make sure he remembers to pay."

“Uh… sorry, that sounds terrible but I’m not sure-” the impossible depth of his voice finally registered and she flinched back, eyes wide as she furiously swept at the same patch of floor. “You sound… just like *him*- ”

“I’m not exactly sure, but he probably had a bit of a… steam deal. Probably a bit annoying to deal with, right?” The drunkard was paying attention to him now, and Shukaku couldn't help but notice the faint narrowing of his eyes, the way he’d set his sake bottle aside and buried his hands in his pockets- or, perhaps, a place for a concealed kunai. “Just… try and remember, please?”

The matron shook her head and focused resolutely on her sweeping- then, paused as she looked at the small pile of glass dust she’d swept from the floor. “What… what is this?”

“Just something to ensure your cooperation.” He smiled mirthlessly- “one star seal: activate.” The lines of sand on the floor flickered bluish gold as they *burned* alive, freezing the matron where she stood. It was, mostly, a harmless seal- just a simple skin-tight barrier, yet effective nonetheless. “Tell me about the man with the steam who came here.” The glass tab burned against him- “ *now* .”

“He- he was going back to earth country! Just a traveling nin, I swear-”

Two shuriken whistled through the air, one slashing a line through the seal, the second *just* missing the top of his head as he quickly ducked. “Say, *shinobi* , what’s the deal with harassing old women? Leave her alone.”

Shukaku palmed a glass kunai, staring at the nin for a moment before cutting the chakra to the broken seal. “A Suna shinobi on garrison duty?”

“What, you’ve been living under a rock or something? Fang is a *free country* now. I’m a *fang* shinobi. The man you’re searching for is pretty dangerous- wouldn’t want you to go after him unaware.” Well,

some of that was new information- last time he'd journeyed out of wind country, fang had still been their vassal.

"Do you know anything about him? I've just gotta tell him a few things- simple enough. A name, perhaps- we never got that at the bars."

The fang shinobi hesitated for a moment. "No. Sorry, I can't really remember anything about him but the steam and killing intent. He's *dangerous* - you *really* don't want to go after him." Slowly he reclined back into his chair, but the subtle tension in his hands and the way he gripped his kunai betrayed him. "We don't really want foreign folk making trouble around here, so if you wouldn't mind…"

Shukaku nodded, flickering through a shunshin to stand beside the door. "Thanks for the warning. I'll keep it in mind." The glass tab on his chest burned, piercing in the faint memories of fading pain- it burned. "Have a great day!" North. North to earth country- he knew enough to *chase* .

At least he hadn't needed to eat anything…

His chakra guided from branch to branch in a chain of easy shunshin, far less clumsy than it would have been had he decided to actually run the distance like most shinobi. Faster too- verdancy blurred around him as he fled northing, following the faint trail of chakra that tinged at the edge of his senses.

It would have been so much *faster* to let his chakra unfold and his body return to what it was meant to be, to run and crush the mountains beneath his feet- but for this, humanity was needed.

The glass tab burned on his chest, a reminder.

A few hours passed in quiet as he slowed, carefully tracing the trail through the endless valleys of fang country as the mountains speared ever higher into the sky and the lakes grew ever scarcer.

Frustratingly, the landscape denied an easy trail like he might have found in wind country- each patch of forest and stream awash in the vibrant nature, every village another where he had to stop and carefully pick up the trail from amongst the thousand other signatures…

Sage mode and its sensory abilities were denied to him, much for the same reason he couldn't just track them down as the Ichibi- but as the seal on the glass tab burned, he ever followed. The night and the depths of creeping shadow were nothing to his pursuit-

There was someone in the forest with him.

Dropping to the crowded undergrowth, a twitch of will pulled a glass kunai from his side, and the *pull* of wind and earth grinding against one another crushed it silently to dust- to sand in its purest form. His chakra danced like a thousand threads through the broken weapon, shimmering in the moonlight as it spread across the seals on a quiet breath.

Shukaku knelt on the ground, palm pressed to the heart of his seal as he channeled chakra into it- lighting it, watching as the essence of energy pulsed through its perfect lines and illuminated the forest in its eerie glow. From somewhere above him a startled curse squawked out through the forest with a flash of chakra, the seal's binding sliding off a target *just* enough out of range to shunshin from its grasp.

Silence- so disquiet in the space between them. Shukaku let his hand drift to the rest of his kunai, mind entrenched in the sand of his cloak- the sand of his form. Waiting.

He didn't have to wait for long.

A flash of darkness against the moon above was all the warning he got as a flight of shuriken flicked through the air around him only to snap off a hastily activated barrier- another layer of odd light, illuminating the forest in unnatural luminescence. Tracing an

explosive seal on the edge of his kunai, Shukaku threw his into the trees and watched in satisfaction as the canopy exploded in a staccato storm of brilliant light. “Come. *Out* .” He drove his killing intent into the words, the vast *anger* of a being who’d lived beyond mortality, a soul who’d watched friend and foe fall beneath the fearsome light of- bijuudama, red eyes ever swirling.

The enemy shinobi shunshined away from him with a gasp, explosive tags fluttering through the air behind him in a desperate attempt to cover his retreat. He was *good* - to have the mere thought of mind to *flee* against his killing intent spoke greatly of his ability- but not good enough.

Flashing into a shunshin of his own he dashed through the explosive tags with barriers of his own flickering around his form, lines of sand painting themselves in counterpoint against ink and commanding- do not explode.

The shinobi who’d dared attack him had done so with the very seals he’d wrought so long ago, and therein lied his mistake. Ending the dash on a rocky crag above the forest, he drew his chakra to the space between his hands- swirling, rotating in fierce whispers and faster, always faster- “ *amenomihashira!* ” The brilliant azure sphere soared through the air, and when it landed the forest around it *exploded* .

Even before the last of the shrapnel had fallen Shukaku shunshined back into the devastated forest, seals dancing over his hand as he inscribed intricate patterns- a terrible promise written in the language of the universe, instilled into a kunai. He *knew* where the enemy nin was- there was no more time for hiding.

He dropped neatly out of the air atop him, and even as his blades of metal and blood sunk into his arm, Shukaku stabbed the glass kunai into the man’s stomach. “One star seal: activate-” and he was bound.

The nin’s blades slipped free from his arms with the soft scrape of sand, and the shinobi *laughed* . “You’re *dangerous* - I should have

known. They'd never send anyone *normal* to track down Asahi-sama. They'd send another *monster* ."

Shukaku frowned, reaching forward to pull off the shinobi's mask. Dirty blonde hair spilled out from beneath its cloth binding, framing the unshaven face of the *fang* nin from the bar. "Tell me where he's going."

"Earth country, obviously." So he was an Iwa shinobi. *Somehow* , given who exactly he was tracking, he'd expected that more or less. "You won't be able to fight him. You might-" he hacked, blood pooling at the edge of his lips as he looked at Shukaku with wide eyes- "fight me… but he's more. More than a man."

Shukaku leaned next to him, whispering into his ears as a seal traced itself noticeably across his scalp. "Don't worry for me. *Neither am I* ." The seal flared with chakra for a single moment, a million blades of wind shearing- and the nin slumped to the ground, dead.

Wincing, Shukaku pulled at all the glass dust floating around, quickly collapsing it into a rough spar as he leapt back into the endless revolutions of leaping, shunshing forward, landing and leaping again. His quarry knew he was being tracked. Not particularly surprising, giving how bad at… *everything* he was in a human form, but frustrating nonetheless. He hoped the rest of the goons wouldn't try to slow him down.

What an idle, useless desire… resigning himself to his fate, he leapt into the night.

The glass tab on his chest still burned.

Jagged spears of earth leapt from the ground to crash with the enemy's jutsu, tearing both to shreds as Shukaku flickered behind the enemy nin and slammed a seal onto the ground. A barrier sprung into existence in electric blue mere moments before an earthen fist

slammed into it, only for a shock of brilliant lightning to conduct itself through the shinobi who'd tried to attack him.

A second seal bound him in invisible barriers, and then Shukaku was desperately dodging a spray of kunai flashing through the air toward him. One of them buried itself in his arm, but he had no time to care about such petty things as *injury* as he summoned the chakra for another amenomihashira, chucking it through the air towards him.

The Iwa shinobi danced through a quick few hand seals before raising a wall of earth from the ground and leaping away. "I'm *not* dealing with that-" the orb's shell shattered through the wall, disgorging the remaining interior spheres to sail straight through the dumbfounded shinobi.

It was like people didn't know amenomihashira had been designed *specifically* to counter barriers like that. Eyeing the bloody carcass as it dropped- in pieces- from the series of explosions, he turned back to the bound shinobi.

"You're… monster." His breath came in quick, pained gasps as his eyes remained glued to the kunai buried in his shoulder. "Worse that… Asahi. Won't… survive. Iwa… reinforcements close." Cursing in the sanctity of his mind, Shukaku flicked a glass kunai into his neck and leapt away into the rapidly thinning forest.

The verdant forests had begun to fade to rocky crags, to scraggly bushes hidden in the shade. Rivers to streams, even as the air grew thin-

The glass tag *burned* , and something in the back of his mind screamed in eternal agony, in desperation-

He leaped into the mountains of earth country, so close- to the thing he'd come searching for, to the edge of annihilation.

He would not abandon his pursuit.

It came in a bolt of steam and steel, an avalanche of force that crashed down on him from a peak with blinding speed, a single barely missed blow blasting open the side of a mountain. “You’re *persistent* , Sunaarashi brat. I thought your clan got killed by that idiot Ishikawa.” Wisps of flame coalesced into twisting vortex- “no more. You *cannot kill me* - fire release: whirlwind of flame!”

A swirling wall of flames swept out at Shukaku, who grabbed the *mountain* he was standing on and threw it roughly into the air before grasping onto the base of its form. Wind chakra swirled around him in a furious vortex, the last whispers of the fire technique lingeringly brilliant white in his storm.

The Iwa shinobi launched himself up at him with a burst of boiling chakra, redirecting himself in midair to spear down at Shukaku as flames engulfed his form. Brilliant white erupted in fierce incandescence where the flames touched Shukaku’s wind as he plummeted to an inevitable intersection, mere seconds- Shukaku grasped the air around them, and *exhaled* .

Roaring, the Iwa nin crashed against the hovering mountain with the force to tear it asunder- deflected mere feet from where Shukaku was standing, close enough for scalding steam to wash over his skin.

The glass tag around his neck burned *brilliantly* .

Shukaku snarled in wordless rage, and the windstorm around him crushed down as earth chakra exploded outwards in shattering circles, grinding the mountain to dust and rubble in an instant. Again- in the breadth of a moment, a sea of floating rubble smashed against itself, and was reduced to *sand* just in time to sweep into a wall and block the fireballs thrown his way.

One hand grasped the burning tag around his neck as its seals burnt out with its quarry’s chakra *so close* . The other hand neatly unsheathed the katana from his back. “This battle will only end with two of us alive.”

The Iwa nin landed neatly on a nearby mountain, chest moving faintly in exertion. “Idiot, there’s only two of us *here* .”

“Not exactly true.” He crushed the chakra tag in his hand, and cast it away into the ravine below as his sand began to write intricate seals across the skies and peaks- he wouldn’t be needing it anymore. “I’m taking Kokuo with me.”

An expression of unadulterated rage flashed across the Iwa nin’s face as he winced, streams of steam wisping off randomly from his back. “What have you *done?* It’s not *shutting up* anymore-”

“He’d recognise me, I’m sure.”

Shouting in incoherent anger the Gobi jinchuuriki leapt at him from his mountain, neatly avoiding the spearing sand as boiling steam extended his leap beyond the extent of *human* power. “ *Die,* scum! I’ll have your blood!” A boiling cloak of chakra flared into existence around his body, bubbling with the Juubi’s malicious killing intent-

Shukaku released his own, the sharp, endless anger that burned to the fullest of its extent- killing intent greater than a Kage’s that *easily* brushed the jinchuuriki’s *paltry* attempts aside. The sand at the edges of his seal rapidly formed into the last characters- just as the jinchuuriki landed in the center and disrupted the inner matrices. This should have been *simple* as his true form, but with the concentration of holding his chakra folded *and* holding the henge- not to mention the awkwardness of being *human* - made everything more difficult.

He’d practiced this seal a thousand times over- and as he rolled out of the way of an impossibly fast punch, he knew that he’d have to get it *right* . Sigils locked into place only for more to die in an instant as Shukaku desperately dodged the jinchuuriki’s expert blows, focus locked fully on the seal forming beneath him. “You… are an annoyance.”

“I could say the same thing…” even as he delivered a punch that shattered the ground, his sentence had trailed off into a quizzical

stare. “Are those *horns?* ”

“Hey! My father had them! Not my fault this is my *natural form* .” The way it made the henge so much easier *was* well appreciated, though. “Just… stop breaking my seal?”

“You *wish* , brat! Fire release: *immolation of five!* ” The tails on his chakra shroud ignited in incandescent flame as they swept across the seal, brushing aside the sand before slamming down on Shukaku in a furious blaze. Violet barriers flickered brilliantly, furious heat melting the stone to slag and glass beneath their feet. “Stay in your shell and *suffer,* Sunaarashi-”

The flames burnt for an eternal moment, incandescent light rising in a confluence of five before petering out to reveal a still standing barrier. Shukaku’s grin *gleamed* as he stood, unbothered by the furious heat- for what was a little fire to a *bijuu* ? “Try again next time?”

“ *You-”* Steam billowed off his form in fury as he fell into a battle stance. “Why won’t you *die!* I held you under that for long enough to kill a Kage!”

“You wish- eight star seal: activate!” Two hundred feet beneath the ground, a second seal in duplicate shimmered to life, a stifling pressure wrapping itself around the jinchuuriki. “You’ve given me all the time I need.”

The jinchuuriki looked at him in frozen horror, barely able to form words. “What… I cannot- don’t *want* to move. There is no reality in which I *can* move? What have you *done to me?* ” Bound his soul to a location in space time. The most powerful seal he’d ever made, prepared over the course of *years* for a moment just like this.

“Nothing important,” he said as he walked up to the jinchuuriki and planted a glass katana in his gut. “Here’s another- five star seal: *activate*.” A rush of boiling chakra poured out from his body as he screamed in endless iterations of agony, seething power pulsing into

the sword as its clear seals began to glow with a bijuu's malicious energy. "Now, sleep-" he yanked the sword up and out to a trail of viscera and the remnants of toxic chakra, even as he slumped in exhaustion. The eight star seal was *intense*.

He held the sword close to him in giddy happiness- he held the burning weight that was Kokuo, his *brother* to his chest, and smiled even as a team of Iwa nin landed cautiously at the edge of the battlefield. Their eyes locked onto him in a moment, killing intent spiking-

Shukaku waved goodbye, grasped a glass spike in his hand, and fell backwards out of reality to the delicious sound of his enemies' rage.

Unnamed Sunaarashi Survivor

Rank: A

Physical Description: Roughly average height with dirty blond hair and pale skin. Known to wear plain white robes with long sleeves, and closed toed boots. Has golden eyes with abnormal pupils (possible dojutsu?) and two short, distinguishing horns on the forehead he likes to cover with his hood. Carries no hitai-ate.

Abilities: Mastery of Sunaarashi sand release sealing art, as well as conventional sealing, to the extent of rapidly creating jonin-level sealing barriers with demonstrated ease. Some mastery over space-time seals. Powerful earth and wind release abilities; potential sealless jutsu. Utilizes sealed glass weapons in recorded encounters; notably clumsy taijutsu and weapons use.

Bounty: 1 mil ryo dead, 30 mil ryo alive for crimes against the state of Iwagakure.

Approach with caution.

Honest question, did anyone guess who he was chasing before the reveal- and if so, how quickly did you get it? I'm sure there's some really smort people out there who were able to guess it in the intro part of the chapter :L

Shukaku: It's like these people keep forgetting about the specific reason behind the creation of a jutsu not seen outside of my own usage since the time of the Sage. Honestly, smh, they deserve to get amenomihashira-ed for such a pitiful education.

Also in today's news: Iwa slaps a ridiculous bounty on a person who technically doesn't even exist.

We Few

Chapter 16: We Few

Breathing out- “it’s important- for… for the future.”

“That’s needlessly cryptic, Shukaku.”

Shukaku gripped his hand into a fist, hoping- banishing the feeling that told him he was betraying himself for a needless risk- for family. He tried to banish… he ignored a thousand coiled thoughts, and spoke instead. “Kokuo… what if I told you this wasn’t… the first time I’ve lived?”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Wrapped in a perfect grip of sand, Shukaku gently stabbed a sword forged in glass and memory- for memory, into the center of a cavernous room. The faint lines of a relatively simple sealing array bloomed out from the blade, thick lines in swirls of immense connection billowing out from the epicenter of it all- a small thousand symbols to regulate the flow of chakra inscribed in whorls of flowing script.

Carefully- almost trepidatiously- Shukaku placed a claw on the edge of the seal and *pushed* chakra into it. Hopefully- he ignored the prickling thought of secrets held, realities denied, and focused on the thought that he’d get to see Kokuo again after so, so long.

The seal lit, incandescent in the brilliant light of chakra as it raced through the spirals of characters, faint threads wrapping around the blade in shimmering webs of translucence. The air seethed with the heavy chakra as the immense symbols lit up in turn, one by one in scarlet brilliance as chakra tore from the blade at blinding speed.

A faint haze of chakra and the endless echoes of killing intent whispered through the room, sheets of boiling steam billowing off the blade- a terrible desire that pushed against his seal and strove to break it apart. To shatter it, and unmake itself rather than be contained a second more-

“Kokuo.” Shukaku grit his sand- his will was *absolute* , and his seals were written into the inviolable laws of the universe. Mere fluctuations of chakra wouldn’t break them- he would not *allow* it. “Kokuo, it’s me, Shukaku. Calm down.” A furious burst of killing intent- of sorrow and hope and *so much,* a depth of emotion that crashed against the conduit-lines in sharp spikes of indignation. “Kokuo!”

Unsealing a bijuu wasn’t supposed to be this hard. If this was how much work it took for *him* , he could certainly imagine how humans didn’t want to even try. The sand at the edges of the room rose to his will, a second ring of seals painting themselves in thick lines around the first, toxic bijuu chakra spilling down into its lines even before he finished-

A circle in a spiral in a circle. The perfect chakra storage seal. The furious spikes of killing intent petered off to a muted impression as the last of Kokuo’s chakra drained from a cracked blade, *almost* broken- but not quite.

Shukaku sighed in relief. If he’d had to hunt down where Kokuo reformed, then he would have been… very upset. Dragging a line of sand through a few of the innermost symbols the perfect rotation of chakra between the inner and outer loops slowly petered to a stop as a specter of boiling steam manifested immensely tall in the immense hall, rearing in furious panic. Chakra, like bones- flesh like the acrid taste of the Juubi’s memory, blood in the infinite flow of nature and all things-

Eyes, the soul of awareness and so much pain as Kokuo- real, *alive* crashed down to the ground in a shuddering cacophony of thunder-

they locked onto Shukaku, and the grin that split his face was like the sun itself. “Shukaku… it’s really you. I thought… I thought I was- I-”

Shukaku stepped across the vast distance between them in a single step, wrapping his tail around him in an embrace so beautiful- and Kokuo, as he had so many years ago, embraced him in turn.

Together, again.

Shukaku smiled, resolutely put away permutations of plans and daunting thoughts of explanations, and let himself- just for once, in that suffusing warmth, let himself bask in the memories of family.

Kokuo splayed out across the floor of Shukaku’s warren, that faintly content grin still plastered across his face. “I’m somehow both astonished and unsurprised that *you* managed to build a home massive enough to comfortably hold a bijuu. You were always one for actually *living* somewhere.”

“You didn’t?”

Kokuo raised a hoof in lackadaisical indifference, his shrug looking faintly off from his position splayed out across the floor. “Not particularly. I spent most of my time in the deep forests, away from pesky humans. It was enough until that Asura wannabe came and tied me up.” His face twisted into a scowl at the end of his sentence, a faint killing intent suffusing the room in the moments before Kokuo sheepishly calmed himself. “Being sealed is… not fun. If any of the others try to hold Indra’s *idiocy* against you again, I’m beating them up.”

Shukaku just *looked* at him, before returning back to the detailed work he was putting into the walls. “I’m perfectly capable of beating anyone up myself, Kokuo. I bet I could even hold my own against Kurama, after all this time.” A faint gleam of mischief flickered through his eyes as he finished the pillar- and the delicate sealwork that reinforced its structure- he’d been working on. “This isn’t even

the most interesting thing in my warren. You'd be surprised what you can do once you get a place humans can't get to.

A ripple of anticipation flickered through Kokuo as he raised his head in interest. "Really? This room is… massive, though- like, large enough to hold all of us-"

Shukaku snorted softly. "Not even close."

"But… it is?" Kokuo looked out at the cavernous hall and its dark reaches, to the concentric rings of pillars and arched roofs holding it together. "All of us could fit in here with plenty of room to spare."

"Until we started tussling, and then we'd bring the entire labyrinth down on top of us. This is the second deepest room, so it needs to be a firm foundation. It *might* , generously, sometime in the far future be strong enough to hold Son Goku on a good day."

Kokuo chuckled softly. "Yeah. I can see that. Or- Kurama would get mad at someone, then attempt to bijuudama you."

"Wouldn't he attempt to bijuudama whoever he got mad at?"

"Nope. He *really* has a complex when it comes to you." Shukaku stifled a snort of laughter- one of them had to get the brother complex, he supposed. "Wait- *second* lowest layer?"

Shukaku placed a palm on the center of the room and *dragged* it backwards, stone rippling and pulling apart in a seam as he cut open the floor to reveal a smaller room beneath, seals flickering and fading away as he reminded them of his sovereignty. Brilliant light spilled from the gash in the floor as Shukaku jumped down to stand beside the map cast in sand and incredible detail as it ever shifted in the mesmerizing patterns of humanity. "The most secure room in the world- not even Zetsu would be able to get in here without my permission. My greatest work."

Kokuo leaned over the gash in the stone, looking down at the intricate heart of his brother's domain in awe. "Whoa. What's it do? Who's Zetsu? Is he one of those Kage humans that kept ordering around my jinchuuriki? I'm pretty sure the… second one? The first one left, so yeah, the second Kage Asahi had was super good at sneaking around."

Shukaku winced softly, staring rather intently down at the bustling hive of activity that was Sunagakure. "Yeah… something like that. Anyways, this seal tracks everyone in wind country- it's how I tracked you down."

"I didn't even know something like this could be *done* with seals… you've really outdone yourself. A safe space in the heart of enemy land, omniscient protection, and… well, whatever else you've gotten up to. Father would be proud."

Shukaku's smile was gentle, if tinged by that faintest bit of solemn sorrow. Gamamaru's advice really was heavy indeed, some times… "Thanks. We're not going to stay cooped up here forever, though. There's a jutsu the Uzumaki made for me some years ago- you'll probably be interested…"

Shukaku stared at- a very small- Kokuo in a halfway mix between fond exasperation, pride, and incredulity. "It's been two weeks. *How* ?"

Kokuo's smirk was absolutely *triumphant* , and not a little bit superior. "Not my fault if you just suck at jutsu-"

"Oh you're getting it now-" Shukaku- currently much larger than his *little* brother, leapt at him to the delicious squeaks of indignation beneath him. It was a good thing they didn't resort to bijuudama. His warren wouldn't have been able to handle *that* .

As it was, Shukaku sulked about the repairs he'd needed to make for *days* .

The dry desert wind whispered through Kokuo's fur in its harsh simplicity, running soft ripples across his shrunken form as they looked out over the harsh crags of Shukaku's labyrinth, and beyond that the rolling dunes of wind country. The radiance of harsh sunlight overhead painted the rocky spire they stood on in a vivid contrast of light and unwavering shadow- illuminating the faint lines traced over every surface in the light touch of fuuinjutsu.

Behind them, a grave- beneath them, a labyrinth, a warren, a home- beyond, a world. Tired eyes stared out across the vast expanse of- existence, sky's breadth and a world of sand. "I still practice ninshu, you know?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. That's probably a good part of why I was able to perform the chakra folding jutsu so quickly. I've… never been one for the whole fighting and killing thing." He sighed, glancing down to the labyrinth beneath him- and, for all its serene beauty from afar, it was a promise of death to those who entered. " *You* were the one that inspired me to keep practicing ninshu, you know? The way you always pushed onwards in Fuuinjutsu or- whatever else you did, never even slowing down even with the eternity of our lives before us… I admire that."

That wasn't true, but Shukaku didn't correct him. He'd *always* had a deadline, an *opponent* … sometimes, he longed to just let him *know* - "Kokuo…" he sighed, impetus ignored. "A second war isn't far off, and there's things I'd rather not happen. You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, but-"

"You're usually right with this sort of thing. I'm sure seeing the world from a different perspective will be interesting."

"Indeed…" he ignored the faint unease that clung to him with the whispered doubts of a liar's web, and focused on the future he meant to shape. "You'll have to henge, though…"

“I hate being a horse.” Sheets of lashing rain poured down across a forest trail, pouring in streams of splashing water from the canopy stretched unevenly above them. “Really, Shukaku, I *hate* being a horse. Having only one tail- that isn’t even prehensile- is *torture* . Rain is torture, too. Living is torture.”

Shukaku just rolled his eyes, slightly shifting a hood made from sand and seals to keep the water out of his eyes. “I *offered* to get you a blanket-”

“But it’ll be destroyed whenever I let the henge drop! It’s *so* unfair that you can just *make* clothes out of your sand, then put all your absolutely *unfair* seal work into it.” A passing couple glanced at them oddly, prompting Kokuo to be blessedly silent for a long moment. “...human, though! It’s so unfair that you can do a human henge so easily! I *still* can’t hold it.”

“I practiced for a not insignificant amount of years.”

“Yeah, and you’re not the ninshu master. However many years it took you… gah, whatever.” Thunder crashed above as lightning split the rain soaked dim, a rumbling peal that cloaked the thrashing of a forest at war with the sky for a lone long moment. “Hey, where are we even going?”

“Uzushiogakure.” One of the stone blocks in the road had given out under the pouring rain- and, from the way it had fallen to pieces- some past battle in the first war. Kokuo jumped across easily enough, and Shukaku ducked into a shunshin to keep up. “It’s an island off the coast of fire country- they’re a vibrant people, sealing masters-”

“ *Sealing* masters? Human sealing masters are the *worst* . Always coming and putting chains… are you *sure* these people are important for this second war or whatever?”

Shukaku hesitated for a long moment before nodding. “Important enough- they’re Asura’s descendants, actually.”

Kokuo tossed his head with a huff of indignant indifference. “You know, that’s not convincing me as to their character. Asura was kind of… really mean to you towards the end of everything. I don’t know why you keep obsessing over him and Indra-”

“I do *not* obsess-”

“Every time we talk over the shared mindscape, you always get this *look* if someone brings up the younger siblings.” Kokuo gave him a pointed look before he could respond, and he settled for a simple huff. “You *do* - don’t even try to deny it. I bet you avoided that Asura look-alike so hard he couldn’t even seal you.”

“I was sealed before, and had no desire to repeat the experience.” He’d also been in possession of a particular bit of future knowledge, so

“Well, *obviously* -” Kokuo paused as the road curved away from the oceanside cliffs, forest’s end giving way to the tumultuous seas as they churned darkly so far below. “Wow… that really looks different from a smaller perspective. Here I was thinking trees were large…”

If Shukaku’s soft smile was partially from the subject change, then Kokuo never needed to know. “We don’t really get a sense of scale until we look at things from a different perspective, sometimes. To a human, everything is immense and fleeting- the other is to be feared, as it’s *dangerous* .”

“...and to us, everything exists in the cycles of the world- hate, nature, war and peace.” Kokuo was silent for a long moment as he looked out over the rainswept sea, to the flickering sparks of lightning as they danced through the clouds. “Their works are impermanent, while we ever exist to see nature turn on itself in cyclical patterns.”

“Not exactly.” Memories, of cities to cut streaks in the sky and global connection- “while the individual work of a human might be insignificant- while they are forgotten, the structures they build can last for millenia. Their societies- the groups they form and the impact they have one one another as they build together a thousand new perspectives- those can last for an eternity.”

“You understand humans well.” A sigh, Kokuo’s expression weary with the weight of his years spent sealed. “I never really understood that- how even with the hate we received as children, even after Indra and Asura betrayed you, you could continue to see them as anything more than pests. After all, they’ve never delivered anything else to us.”

If only he knew… “Okimi and her family were a breath of fresh air to me. As much as they can be capable of terrible things, humanity constantly refreshes itself with its own innocence. They lived in Uzushiogakure, you know.” He shook his head softly, trying to ignore the soft voice that said the Uzumaki were unnecessary.

He knew that- he was going to save them anyways.

Shkaku gently placed a hand on Kokuo’s flank, before *pushing* him off the cliff. “Have fun!”

“ *You*- ” the sound of a splash far below echoed against his faint laughter as he dropped neatly off the cliff in turn, landing with perfect grace on the surface of the water. “You absolute *menace* !” Billowing steam poured from Kokuo’s form as he struggled to push himself to the top of the water. “How are you *doing* that?”

“Walking on water? Father taught us-”

“No! Maintaining the henge, folded chakra, *and* walking on- on these choppy waves!” For a long second he shakily managed to stand on the crest of a wave, only to be slammed into the cliffside they’d just jumped from. “You- *gah!* ”

Faint tendrils of sand danced in the space between the raindrops, an inversion of gravity gently lifted Kokuo from the ocean in a swirling kaleidoscope of floating water and rain undone. “Fold your chakra twice again, and I’ll carry you there.”

“I don’t need-” he looked down at the choppy waves beneath him, and deflated. “ *Fine* . You better have a *good* reason for helping these Uzumaki idiots, though.” Shukaku smiled at the barb- but, in the end he wasn’t even sure of that himself.

“Is this the place?” Kokuo- henged as a particular young colt- staggered by him as they stepped out of the light rain beneath a small pavilion, windswept forests behind them and a lonesome beach ahead. A lighthouse and small dock towered from the cold mists before them, walled compound behind them nothing but shadows in the moonlight. “We’ve been traveling forever.”

Shukaku shook his head as he knocked quietly on the lighthouse door, sand already creeping up to disable some of the more obvious traps hidden neatly in the wood’s whorls. “Uzushiogakure’s much more packed than this- but you’ll *love* this place. Or maybe be a bit intimidated, but it’s really depends on the person you interact with.”

“Me? Intimidated by a *human* ? Find the Asura pretender again and then I’ll consider-” the door creaked open and he fell silent in an abrupt instant, sharply watching the figure silhouetted against the flickering lamplight.

“We don’t need *more* random- oh. You’re… what’re strangers doing here at this time of night? And with such a young horse, too! What a cutie…” the woman who’d opened the door dropped to her knees to rub at Kokuo’s head for a second. A wisp of faint sand drifted from one of her pockets to subtly touch against the seals Shukaku had deactivated. “Huh… would have thought with the horns and everything… well, come in, then. Family’s always welcome.”

The glare Kokuo shot Shukaku asked one question and one question only- *family?*

Shukaku just smirked in return, tucking a weakly protesting Kokuo under his arms and slipping into the lighthouse's gentle warmth. There was a beguilingly simple atmosphere to the building- stacks of tools in neat piles, simple wooden stairs spiraling up the lighthouse and a fishing rod or two leaned haphazardly against the wall. A second door lead further inside- ostensibly into the larger complex tucked away behind the docks… simple.

For everything but the seals subtly engraved onto the entire wall in a faint edge of shimmering chakra, it could be mistaken as a rural, if somewhat well off, clan compound. "So!" The woman dragged a hand down a blank wall, sigils impressing them over a complex fuuinjutsu as it revealed itself. "We've not have survivors come back to us for a while- too hidden, unfortunately, so what brought you over?"

"I'm the Ichibi."

Kokuo jerked in startled surprise, kicking a heel into Shukaku's back. "You don't just go and *tell* sealmasters-"

"Ichibi-sama!" The woman ducked into a low bow even as the bricks- pulled back from around the doorway to reveal a cheerily lit hallway. "We'd be honored to host you and your… horse?"

Shukaku smirked softly. "He's my brother-"

"Hey! I'm this moron's *older* brother! Not his *horse* ." The henge slid off him a cloud of smoke, revealing his natural, creamy white fur and five swishing tails.

Still small, though. Shukaku discreetly restrained his laughter at how *adorable* Kokuo looked like that.

The woman blinked, then bowed to Kokuo as well. “Well then, Gobi-sama, we’d be honored to host you as well. To assuage your worries, the Sunaarashi family would never turn our seals against the honored bijuu- to fight family would be a perversion of everything we stand for.”

“Family?” Kokuo looked at Shukaku with a look somewhere between faintly condescending and amused. “How did *this* happen?”

“Uh, well… remember Okimi?” As Kokuo’s nod, he sheepishly rubbed his hands together- thanking his henge for small things like failing when it came to purely human reactions. Like furious blushing, for a random example. “She more or less adopted me as her father during my stay in Uzushiogakure, and… well, the Sunaarashi are her descendants.”

“You went and got a family- and *didn’t tell me?* ” Kokuo rammed his leg in mock-anger as they walked through the hallway, curious eyes peeking out at them- the bijuu, mostly. Shukaku’s human henge was noticeable, but not when a miniature Gobi was walking right beside him. “Why aren’t they in Uzushiogakure, then?”

“We abandoned the island of whirlpools after they proceeded with their plans to seal away the honored Bijuu.” They stopped at the door to a long staircase, pausing for a minute as the woman picked apart the seals that served as locks in the compound. “An… unwise decision, as we were attacked by the Shodai Tsuchikage. Fortunately, Ichibi-sama intervened, slaying the man and sending us to the land of waves.”

Kokuo gaped up at Shukaku as they slid through the door at the bottom of the staircase into a comfortably large room filled, rugs splayed out across cold stone, and a fire burning cheerfully from a sealed hearth. “You killed one of the Kage brats? Ok, that’s *enough* . You’re going to tell me *all* the adventures you got up to without me knowing!”

As their guide smiled at him with a wry grin that suggested she knew *exactly* how a sibling fight would go- as Kokuo jumped onto the small bed with a smug grin and everyone else just relaxed in a place made for family- Shukaku wished he could.

Kokuo yawned, stretching out across the lone bed, tails possessively wrapped around the pillows with strength enough to hold them from Shukaku's grasp. He wove a tale of a jinchuuriki who, for all his faults was a masterful ninjutsu master, a man who'd dance through the fires for a second's breadth and blast across the battlefield in a burst of steam. He didn't speak of killing- but the movement, the perfectly controlled dance of jagged movement- that was something Kokuo had been able to admire.

Across the mattress, Shukaku only listened halfway. "Kokuo…" he breathed- remembered Gamamaru's warning, watching his brother swim awkwardly through covers designed for human hands. Remembering the tragedy of the future… he'd known. He'd known and he'd only ever told his father. "That's a nice story."

He wondered how much Kokuo would hate him if he knew. "Shukaku, you look like a prune. I know being sealed sucks, but he drew on my chakra enough that it wasn't *all* bad… I mean, I learned some cool ninjutsu! Watch- fire style: immolation of five-"

Yelping as Kokuo's tails *caught flame*, he dragged a truly monumental amount of sand out of his cloak to form a water release exploding tag- well, at the end of it all the bedsheets were more than a little scorched, and definitely soaked quite thoroughly. "Kokuo. Please tell me what you were thinking hwne you decided to use a *high level fire jutsu*- indoors."

"Eh… uh, nothing? I wasn't?"

" *Exactly* ."

“So- um- tell me more about your sealing adventures! How was building the labyrinth?” Shukaku gave him a *look* for changing the topic of conversation, but nonetheless dropped into a brief explanation to some of his home’s technical aspects- simplified for people who didn’t understand fuuinjutsu esoterica, but still complicated enough that Kokuo had clearly decided listening was too much effort. “C’mon, tell me more about this hiding whirlpools place. You’ve gotta have a good reason to save it.”

Shukau paused, biting back rationalizations at the tip of his tongue. It was *hard* … breathing in- carefully, he steadied himself. His brother was his brother… he hated killing. He couldn’t bring him into this without telling him *exactly* what he was getting into…

It was as much a rationalization as to why he was breaking from carefully laid plans as the reasons to save the Uzumaki had been- as much as he’d told himself when he’d gone to free Kokuo. Breathing out- “it’s important- for… for the future.”

“That’s needlessly cryptic, Shukaku.”

Shukaku gripped his hand into a fist, hoping- banishing the feeling that told him he was betraying himself for a needless risk- for family. He tried to banish… *he* ignored a thousand coiled thoughts, and spoke instead. “Kokuo… what if I told you this wasn’t… the first time I’ve lived?”

Kokuo glanced up to him, mirthful grin slowly sliding off his face at Shukaku’s voice. “Really?” He sounded so- so *small* , his voice tucked in on itself in disbelieving- Shukaku hoped he was misinterpreting the *hurt* that flashed across his brother’s face. “You actually-”

A thousand strings of sand unraveled from his cloak as he dropped the henge, returning to his natural form with the soft relief of being *himself* again. Seals laid themselves across the floor in triplicate- barriers against *everything* as he carefully checked to *be certain*

nobody was listening in. “Yeah. It’s the truth- I’m… I didn’t tell you, but I guess I’m weaker to family than I thought.”

“You…” Kokuo *laughed* , sharp, bright and cheerfully- grin quietly fixing itself back onto his face. “I can’t *believe* you! It makes so much *sense* - you were always so much more mature than the others-” the grin slipped from his face as though struck, a depth of horror resplendent in every inch of his body. “No… *damn you* - you’re *actually* older than me! You keep saying you’re the older brother-”

Shukaku whacked him- lightly- on the snout with his tail, trying to contain a grin of his own. “You *brat*- here I was, concerned that you’d *hate* me, and you fixate on the fact that I’m all of nineteen years older than you?”

Kokuo grasped in his tails, drawing him into an embrace. “You should have never needed to hide it in the first place… I mean, I get it, I was a total idiot when I was younger, and Kurama… and Son Goku… and Matatabi… and most of the others would try and beat you up for that-”

“Chomei wouldn’t.”

Kokuo rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Chomei is the most lovable thing to have ever walked the face of the earth. But… Shukaku- I’ve told you this before, and I’ll tell you this again… even this won’t change it. I have always, will always, love you… but you *have* to tell me about your past life. Let me guess… you were a human- you had to be, you empathize with them too much to not-”

“Yeah, yeah.” Shukaku returned the embrace across a bed burned and soaked, remembering a father who’d said the same thing- “I’ll tell you all about it, but first- first, let me tell you about a particularly hateable blob called *black Zetsu* -”

Uzushiogakure rose from the early morning mists in brilliant color as they slipped in unnoticed beneath the waves, quietly unfolding the

wards in the memory of subtle breaches. They'd remained much the same since he'd last come, resolute as ever against the tides and ocean squalls- insufficient as ever to his passage.

Well, except for the one *he'd* made- he was very glad he remembered what he'd done, else he'd be stuck there for *weeks* beneath the water as he slowly picked through his defenses. He'd really outdone himself, here. " *Kokuo-* " they spoke through the shared mindscape, something surprisingly difficult to do without fully dragging their consciousness down into it- " *you can't do a human henge, so you'll have to wait outside.* "

" *Fine.* " His brother's voice sounded faint- a whisper across miles, distorted by the space between waking reality and dreams twice over. " *I don't suppose they have many horses I could henge into here?* "

The foundations of his garnet barrier, the one he'd designed to withstand almost any attack, slowly folded away, the detection web tying itself into dimensional knots as it carefully pulled back from his ministrations. " *Not really. They don't use pack animals at all- the island's too small for that. Remember-"*

" *Yeah, I remember. If they do make it… they won't know what hit them.* " There was a hint of solemn dedication, a memory of sorrow- and Shukaku stepped through the last barrier, closing it behind him. " *Be careful.* "

Feeling the raging currents as they tugged him, the roaring whirlpools he remembered so well from his time amongst the Uzumaki hundreds of years ago, Shukaku nodded in resolute determination. " *I will* , *Kokuo. For you* ." For a future *two* knew- and how freeing that was…

He stepped onto the shores of Uzushiogakure from the water, quietly slipping past the children playing on the unguarded shores- for why would they need to guard something protected by the full strength of their fuuinjutsu? Guarded by Shukaku's divine barrier? No surprise

attack would be able to make it through even the passive defenses- shouldn’t have been able to, even with the patchwork masterpiece they’d had before Shukaku blew it to pieces.

It was *suspicious* - even Kokuo agreed- and if he figured out what *exactly* was there, then he would have saved half of the world’s most venerable family- the only family to have held onto peace since his father’s time.

For the sake of a nineteen year old boy who’d thought the Uzumaki were the coolest clan- for the sake of a thousand rationalizations and Okimi’s memory, he wouldn’t let Uzushiogakure fall.

The first thing he did was integrate himself into the island- which was a bit more difficult than he’d imagined. Uzushiogakure was much more crowded than it’d been the last time he’d been there- a bustling civilian population nestled in the space between the old manors was mostly responsible for that. The entire place felt more alive than it had been before, which was particularly impressive when it came to talking about an entire island filled with Uzumaki.

It wasn’t so hard to slip neatly into the crowds of civilians- a simple henge over his horns and eyes was really all he needed to remain completely *human* - and the volume of refugees were simple enough to get lost in. They’d lived up to their nature as a peaceful nation- the sheer diversity of people he saw crowding the busy marketplaces from the world over was almost staggering in its breadth.

What *was* hard was avoiding the ridiculously sensitive sensors who’d locked onto him the moment he decided it was a good idea to leave the marketplace and sojourn up into the residential district. Two shinobi dropping out of nowhere and binding him in chakra-restricting fuuinjutsu wasn’t even *close* to his idea of a good time. Getting thrown into a cell… much less so.

“So.” The woman standing beside looked at him in silent, somewhat nervous condemnation- as though she’d never actually mastered the

art of being properly intimidating. Shukaku would've been surprised if she could even muster up an inkling of killing intent with how nervous she looked at having to confront a potential infiltrator. "I assume this is an… interview?"

"Yeah, we're gonna ask you a few questions, and you better answer with the *truth* , or we're gonna throw you right out- believe it!" Shukaku *stared* for a long while, just processing verbal tick- apparently, by either culture or genetics, that sort of exuberance was… normal. Even amongst the shinobi. The woman met his dumbfounded stare with a furious glare of her own, evidently indignant- but for what, he couldn't tell- "you're just gonna *look* at me like that- you-" *oh* . He gave her a faint smile, which only seemed to enrage her further.

Chuckling, he glanced away to the seals scrawled over the walls, which included some impressively powerful barriers. They were clearly based on some of the basics he'd taught to Okimi, and with the way they were impressed into the brickwork… Sunaarrashi work, he supposed.

The door to the cell creaked open, a tall, crimson-haired man in billowing, strikingly *red* robes striding purposefully into the room. "Mio, stop glaring at the suspect. He's not even officially a prisoner- just a suspicious person." *This* was the lackadaisical security that was going to get them killed. Shukaku watched in interest as the woman sulked away, to the corner, only to be replaced by the man who could have only been described as- "Hello, shinobi-san- I only assume you're a shinobi, with your strikingly dense chakra- my name is Uzumaki Shinku."

Crimson. Shukaku desperately bit back a laugh. He'd been named *crimson* . How very imaginative. "Yeah. I was just… visiting an old home."

Shinku raised an eyebrow. "An old home, you say?"

The faint few grains of sand which had sunk into the cracks between the floor rose smoothly into the air, swirling into the kanji for *friend* . “Sunaarashi Shukaku.”

A quiet blink was the only mark of surprise that displayed itself across Shinku’s face. “That would explain the chakra density-”

“I *knew* that he was weird! Suspicious! The chakra restraining seals weren’t working at *all* …” Mio glanced at the somewhat irate looking clan head, then to Shukaku’s wry grin, and slowly fell silent. “Yeah… the, uh, Sunaarashi are pretty cool.”

“I assume you want to stay in Uzushio? The Sunaarashi compound has since been turned into civilian housing, but I’d be proud to call one of your honored clan Uzumaki again.”

Shukaku nodded solemnly and restrained a grin. *Perfect* - founding a clan really did wonders to making people less suspicious of his skills. “Thank you- I’ll be sure not to waste the opportunity.” He wouldn’t- and the Uzumaki wouldn’t ever have to remember the ignominy of their slaughter.

To live, amongst the island winds once again…

To save the Uzumaki had never been part of his plans- but he *refused* to regret the attempt.

Two years passed quickly in a prelude to war. It was almost startling, how much everyone *knew* a second war was coming- a constant edge of nervous anticipation that hung heavy over the shinobi and civilians both. To Shukaku, it was both an exercise in frustration and the closest he’d ever been to one of his siblings.

Even with what foreknowledge still applied, there were a lot of things that living in a shinobi village made *difficult* . If he’d been a master of stealth, perhaps, then it might have been a different story- but he

was a *bijuu* , and stealth had never been something he'd focused on overmuch

He'd set himself up as a fairly common visitor to the library, quietly checking the chakra signatures of the shinobi who passed by to the central tower- matching names to faces, and chakra to signatures, and feeling all the while like it was too little, too late.

It was almost like a particularly interesting puzzle- he couldn't use any of the immense sealing arrays he'd gotten used to being able to make in an instant, so surveillance had to be set up with exacting care. Replicating his grand seal without alerting the Uzumaki to its existence had been remarkably difficult, but in the depths of the night he carefully scribed line after line of fuuinjutsu into nondescript plates of glass, and in the day he gently hid them beneath rocks and stones and generations of Uzumaki seals.

Slowly, as the tension outside Uzushio ever increased, his view of the city drew to a careful completion. Konoha and Suna were at each other's throats again, with Iwa's belligerence to the two only exacerbating the instability of peace- and more than that, everyone wanted a piece of the two countries who'd just been liberated from wind country's control. It was a *mess* , and the general consensus amongst the Uzumaki was that the mainlanders could deal with it all.

Shukaku knew better, and as border skirmishes between the great nations flickered off and on, again and again- he remembered the lonely few Uzumaki left alive, and searched through sleepless nights for a *pattern* . Something, anything to tell him who would bring down the barriers.

Two and a half years after he'd slipped quietly into the Uzushio crowds, with the winds of war ever on the horizon, he *found* one- a barely visible slick of chakra that hung putrid beneath the bedrock. A faint taint, next to invisible against the background of natural energy, sometimes unnoticeable to even *his* careful observation-

Shukaku watched his greatest enemy, and knew that saving the Uzumaki was going to be much more difficult than he'd thought.

" *Zetsu* is here?" Kokuo paced in agitated lines across the empty silence of their shared mindscape, hooves slamming against the immutable non-material, almost stone of the floor in indentations of anxiety. "I thought this was going to be *simple* ."

"Well, at least it tells us who's the spy?"

Kokuo rolled his eyes, slumping to the ground in a peculiar mix of exhaustion and silent exasperation. "We should leave. No, I know you're not going to abandon them this far into your efforts to save their lives, but I'll still say it's far too easy for Zetsu to catch wind of… everything. We're going to have to be far, *far* more careful from here on out."

Shukaku nodded, grim. "Of course. As if we *wouldn't* ." Zetsu. How he *hated* Zetsu-

"I can feel your killing intent at the *thought* of that shadow. Go calm down before you scare half the island and *actually* reveal our presence to Zetsu." Kokuo stepped forward, composure regained- "but perhaps… we can make this work for us."

Shukaku nodded, breathing deeply in the sanctity of their mindscape- such vast expanses of anger, so calm. Careful wasn't *half* of how cautious he'd be. Sliding out of the mindscape with a final flicker of- love, quiet acceptance and an embrace from a brother who would always be by his side- he sat up from his meditative pose, carefully undoing the fuuinjutsu for the small sand display he'd hid in his closet. Too vulnerable- all it would take is a single glance from a curious plant, and all his plans would be ruined.

Making a more subtle connection to his surveillance seal was an interesting exercise. It had to be small enough to keep on his person, but still be able to connect with the sealing network. He'd set to work

on inscribing the complicated display mechanisms into a small plate of glass he could keep hidden within himself, quietly mauling beautifully designed fuuinjutsu to death in display script. Finely tuned lines of sigils to control *exactly* what appeared on the sand sprawled out into messes of conflicting translation to display everything in *barriers* .

It was *messy* , but it worked, and not even a month later he had a foot-wide plate that was- sometimes- able to track Zetsu. As he kept an eye on the comings and goings of the parasitic plant, there were times when he'd rise to the surface and just… disappear from all his senses.

How Zetsu managed to do this eluded Shukaku, much to his endless frustration. A few times he even went so far as to approach the area Zetsu was rising into but- as he'd suspected- it was within secure compounds he didn't really have any right being inside of.

Stealth. He wasn't a shinobi, and *still* he was wishing for stealth. It would have made everything *so* much easier.

Still, he carefully watched Zetsu, and planned.

Three years, two months, and a handful of days after Shukaku arrived at Uzushiogakure, the first sails of an enemy fleet crested the horizon, and the first move of the second great shinobi war was played.

Time was running out.

The entire island was in an uproar as Shukaku snuck into the the missions and sealing office for the first and last time, eyes locked on the shadowed corner where the greatest evil to ever walk the earth sat in perfect invisibility. A chunin sprinted past, blades strapped to his back, arms laden with sealing paper-

The shadow twisted-

Zetsu's presence disappeared entirely, and the Uzumaki jerked to a halt, glancing around for a moment before running along with the errand he'd been assigned. Intricate fuuinjutsu locked tight to his chakra Shukaku dropped from the roof and slipped after him- pursuing him through the warren of twisting streets and panicked crowds, past the supply depot where he dropped off the tags- and into the harbor as he leapt off the docks.

The traitor, thought Shukaku with malicious glee as he jumped atop the water behind him. He'd finally found him.

Far out to sea, the water bulged as an immense burst of steam blasted from the water- the shadow of a colossus rising from within its billowing shadows- a roar echoed across the waves, a killing intent seeped in the Juubi's memory. Five lashing tails were the first thing apparent as the mists faded- the Gobi rose from the waves, and the invading fleets trembled.

The moment of frozen, sheer dumbfounded *shock* that stopped the chunin in his tracks was just long enough for Shukaku to catch up to him and fling a handful of glass kunai at him, all of them dodged in fluid movement.

Cursing, shukaku leapt out of the way of a water release ninjutsu, countering with a blast of air as he recalled the glass kunai to his hand with his sand release. If this nin was a chunin, then Shukaku was a *kitten* . Another wave of water swept at him, transforming into a water dragon bullet at the last moment as Shukaku leapt to the side. "You don't have to *attack* me- I'm not staying for this bloodbath. Just let a deserter leave in peace!"

"As if-" Somewhere in the distance, Shukaku could *feel* two immense energies being balanced- yang and yin, eight parts to two, and a wave of light flashed out across the Kiri fleet in a flash that broke the overcast sky in lurid shades of black and white- "you're only a deserter. I *don't think so* ." The glass kunai broke into a glittering stream of dust that surrounded the shinobi in dancing rings of fuuinjutsu script. "One star seal: activate."

The chunin stiffened for a moment before something flickered across his eye, pinprick orange and infinitely *dark* - faint chakra flickering through his body as his veins ran black. Almost shakily, he flicked through a set of hand seals, and when he spoke his voice was just a faint bit thicker- quietly confident. “Yin release: binding shadows.” A wave of *darkness* billowed out from beneath the waves, latching onto Shukaku’s seals and tearing them apart in furious waves. “The Sunaarashi were a disease on our nation, and you’re the same.”

Shukaku pulled a glass tanto from a seal on his back, dancing away from the wave of shadows that swept out toward him beneath the crashing waves of a weak water jutsu. Barriers lit up around him in flickering crystal light, jutsu after jutsu crashing into an inviolable defense he jumped from wave to wave, each swing of the tanto blasting the water aside with furious force.

The chunin shunshined back to the edge of the scarlet barrier, hands blurring through a set of seals at furious speed. “Water release: great waterfall!” The ocean *heaved* up beneath them, a truly monumental amount of water crashind town in a wave towards Shukaku. It met a half-dome of hexagonal barriers and *exploded* outwards in a wave of furious water- and the shadows hidden within it locked onto Shukaku’s form, binding him to stillness.

Drooping with exhaustion, the chunin tossed a kunai into his palm and stepped towards Shukaku. “The Sunaarashi- I *hate* them. They took our name and dragged it through the dirt- left, and were killed in a day by the Tsuchikage. The Uzumaki are a forgone nation- a ruin of ideals. Blood and war remain- and *I will deliver* !” He dove the kunai down towards Shukaku-

Eyes wide, Shukaku intoned with a simple flex of chakra- “four star seal: *activate!* ” The yin chakra binding him *shivered* as the fuuinjutsu on his tanto glowed brilliant white, all the chakra around them swept up vortex centered on the small blade as its seal *reached out-* and *absorbed* the techniques. The chinun flickered away with a curse, running the to the barrier as Shukaku threw himself in pursuit, blade eating at his chakra-

“Annihilation of one- seal: *activate!* ” Glowing palms smashed against the crimson barrier mere moments before Shukaku shoved the tanto through his back. Eyes, triumphant, bloodshot with veins of purest black, looked up at him in contempt. “You… *lose* … Sunaarashi.” Fractures of white light tore across the barrier as if failed, tearing itself apart from the inside. “The Uzumaki always placed… too much faith in their barriers.”

Shukaku shoved the blade deeper, then *kicked* the body a hundred feet out to sea. “For good reason.” It was little more than a faint murmur- the chunin wouldn’t be able to hear it, but he was sure black Zetsu could. “Activate!” A *second* barrier, glowing brilliant scarlet coalesced in perfect hexagons, crashing together in an interlocking, *perfect* barrier. “Shame on you for thinking there was only *one!* The Sunaarashi were good for *something!* ”

It was useful, to blame heretofore unforeseen powerful techniques on ancient clan work- and *this* one was designed with a particular black manipulator in mind.

So long as the barrier was raised, Zetsu was locked out of Uzushiogakure.

Shukaku watched with a smile as the traitor’s body sank beneath the waves, beady orange eyes staring at him with furious hate- watched a clash of fleets and titans as Kokuo tore through the invading coalition, and thought- perhaps, it would work out in the end.

“ *It’s done* ,” he called to Kokuo, and one last bijuudama smashed into the Kiri fleet before Kokuo turned away, long strides pounding into the water as he galloped into the distance- and Shukaku pondered the changes he’d already wrought, and what changes he would, again-

The second war began with the failed invasion of Uzushiogakure, and ended with the tattered remnants of the once-majestic clan, battered from nine long years of siege, emigrating to Konoha.

This is the story of everything between.

Between the three great nations, each bitter enemies to one another, the smaller nations are ground to a muddy mess of blood and death, indiscriminate violence and sensless genocide. Kiri landed its fleets in Kumo and fought bloody invasion after bloody invasion on the shores and amongst the peaks of lightning country, countless dead in the shadows and misty sunlight.

Hiruzen Saurtobi donned the hat of Sandaime Hokage after injury and age stole his sensei from the battlefield.

Chiyo's poisons, so deadly- a death sentence to any ninja nicked by a blade- were countered by a young Senju Tsunade.

The Nidaime Mizukage clashed against the Nidaime Tsuchikage, and both were slain in a battle that gouged craters into the landscape of lightning country.

Takigakure stole the Nanabi from Suna, and fended off every attempt to retrieve it. Shukaku could only guess that excessive use of Chomei's particularly fast flight was responsible for that miracle.

The land of sky thought to attack Kirigakure with their forces occupied on the continent, and were razed for their arrogance, the few remainders of their clan scattering nomadic across the globe.

Hatake Sakumo, Konoha's White Fang, rose to fame for never failing a mission- for never leaving a comrade- and was killed in ignominy during an unsanctioned rescue mission deep within earth country when he should have been the cornerstone of Konha's defense in western fire. The world spat on his corpse.

Hanzo the Salamander turned Ame into a place where shinobi of every nation came to die, gruesomely and slowly.

And a team of three somewhat remarkable shinobi fought against an insurmountable foe, and in exchange for their defeat were made

legendary.

Shukaku sat on the shattered and crumbling remains of a once proud building, rubble half sunken into the mud and still waters that stretched into the distance far away. Three children sat beside him, staring in anxious fear toward the horizon as four immense shadows clashed to the sound of rumbling explosions and S-rank ninjutsu.

The rain around them was dark and deep, its weight the tears of the world.

“Do you think they’ll win?” The blue-haired girls’ voice was shaky and quiet against the pouring rain, eyes glued onto immense battle in the distance. “I… they’re fighting *him* .”

“Well, obviously! They’re *them* . Jiraiya-sensei wouldn't be defeated by *anyone* !” Shukaku couldn’t help but bask in the sheer *confidence* of it all- but he knew the end of this fight. Unless he decided to intervene in the fullness of his power, there was likely little he could do- and the Ichibi fighting in Ame would be like waving around a *go team Zetsu* flag. “...and then Jiraiya was like- whoom! He has some *really* big frogs…”

“Yeah!” Some of the blue-haired tension relaxed slightly against the orange kid’s exuberance, and Shukaku could see how his death could so easily tear them apart and build them back up into monsters. “Right, uh, shinobi? They’re gonna win, right?”

Shukaku hummed softly, neither confirmation nor denial- “possibly.”

The final voice of the three spoke through the splashing rain, muted- yet in its silent conviction the most powerful of the three. “They fight for what they believe in. Hanzo fights for what he *doesn't* - that, that will always triumph.” The others *listened* to him, as he turned his eyes- those concentric, swirling rings on rippling amaranthine blue- to where Shukaku sat perched on the broken towers of a village destroyed. “You look different.”

“Don’t we all?”

The red-haired boy looked at him with a curious tilt to his head, squinting softly as he looked at Shukaku. “You look… larger than life. With the others, even Jiraiya-sensei’s team, I see all the parts of them together that make them *mortal* . For you… I see only the infinities of sand.”

“You’re very perceptive, Nagato.” The boy flinched, the other two settling into a slightly defensive posture- he’d never been told their names. With his knowledge though… it was hard *not* to know. He’d come in a moment of curiosity, to find whether or not Madara had truly lived- but the eyes told a story in absolute. “Remember that thought, and when we think of what makes men gods, remember the difference between divinity and arrogance.” The sand in his arm twisted and turned, coalescing into a single glass kunai- rippled with concentric rings of useless seals and a few simple characters for durability- colored faintly blue in the echoes of minerals and dreams- “take this, and remember peace.”

Nagato gently held the kunai, wondering eyes glancing over its form as a brilliant grin split his face. “Thank- thank you! I’ll be sure to remember, shinobi-san!” And Shukaku couldn’t help but wonder-

A dream, he supposed, as he shunshined away from the battle that would define an age, and the three who’d define eternity.

Soon. So very soon…

I was really looking forwards to the actual meat of the story so; second war speedrun. That may or may not be responsible for why this chapter is so long :L

Kokuo: yes, but please give me a reason as to why we're saving these humans.

Shukaku: uh, I think they're cool?

Pivotal Moments

Chapter 17: Pivotal Moments

Rin and her sensei locked eyes, the first on the edge of tears, the second holding back maniac laugher as an incredulous, too-bright, disbelieving grin stretched across his face. “Damn.” His voice was a breathy whisper as he pulled at his hiraishin again, flashing away. “They’re never going to make me Hokage now.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The third great shinobi war started much like the first two, in blood and endlessly moving regiments, with heroics and desperation. The entire continent fell to turmoil *again* - all too visible in the maddening patterns of death and vicious sabotage, easily apparent in the shifting iconography of sand- the omniscient eye of Shukaku’s seal.

Kokuo sat beside his brother in the furthest depths of his labyrinth, watching as Suna invaded Konoha, and Iwa invaded Suna- watching as regiments of Kiri nin landed on the coasts of wind and advanced into the land of rivers. He watched the battles of a humanity torn against itself, and sat in silent anticipation. “You don’t *have* to do this.”

Shukaku shook his head softly, watching with attentive eyes as Iwa troops pushed towards the wind temple, securing footholds in northern wind only to dash headfirst into Ame and return in the jerky, slow pattern indicative of fatal injury. “This is our best chance, Kokuo- our pivotal moment. I’ve been preparing for this for… a long time.”

Kokuo motioned as if to argue, then dipped his head in resignation. “I get that… just, sometimes, I worry about what you’ll make of it all.

Everything’s different from what you dreamed-”

“In the dream that was life… some things remain the same, and I have wagered the future that it’ll be enough.” Nagato had still been given Madara’s eyes, and Zetsu still prowled- “It’s a good plan, Kokuo. There’s no need to worry.”

“Yeah, and Kurama will still be a total bully at the end of things.”

Shukaku snorted, wrapping his tail in resolute embrace around Kokuo- basking in the quiet reminder that even at the end of all things, he still had his family. “I see what concerns you now- you just want to see the floof-ball humbled, don’t you?”

“Well, who wouldn’t?”

“True.” A thousand years, and here they were- arguing about whether or not they were ready. “Stay safe, Kokuo.”

“I’m not the one who’s going to be in danger.” Five tails wrapped around him, pulling him close- “with love, Shukaku. With love- don’t die on me. I’ll never forgive you if you go and get yourself killed.”

“You’ll still love me, though.” It wasn’t a question.

Kokuo’s smile was almost tearful- “of course. I was *always* -”

And beneath them, in the eyes of the seal, the third shinobi war played out in the intricate dance of logistics, of bloody attrition written in the bones of so many- a prelude, only, to the end of the world.

Space behind him shimmered as a glass spike gleamed- *he would not allow it* .

Blood sparkled in the air as his blade sheared through another of the Iwa nin who’d ambushed him, a cry of pain silenced in an instant by the dull thump of the exploding tag he’d embedded into the man’s

chest bursting in a spray of viscera. “I don’t suppose you’ll just leave a poor independant alone?”

The remaining Iwa kunoichi stared for a long moment at the place where her teammate had just *exploded* . “ *Die* Konoha scum! Earth release: mudslide-” and even as Shukaku leapt atop a flowing wave of earth, seals spilling out of the air around him, she was flitting through another set of hand seals- “earth release: *earth dragon bullet!* ” The ground beneath them tore as an immense beast of stone and dirt bore down upon him.

“One star seal: activate.” The sand hovering around the dragon finished its formation as the dragon *froze* in its tracks, hovering in the air like so much rubble as Shukaku called on the wind in silent dominion, slicing deep gashes into her chest. “Why do you think I’m a Konoha shinobi? I’ve been living in the nearby town for several months.”

“You… you have to be with the team here-” she choked as a blade protruded through her heart, eyes glazing over in the still peace of agonizing death.

“That was so *cool* ! You gotta show me how you did that when we get back to Konoha!” A small girl, blood dripping from her coat and pooling down the scratches on her face, cheered brightly as she slammed a kunai through the woman’s eyes. “Gotta make sure they don’t have some weird suicide jutsu- sensei always says that Iwa nin like that sort of stuff.”

Shukaku stared blankly at the *purple* hair, then cursed, with great vigor. Trust him to mess up a plan in the first few moments. “Hey, Anko-” the girl paused her mutilation of the bodies, looking up curiously. “I was waiting around here for a team- don’t exactly remember their name, but they had a ridiculously cheerful Uchiha and a white-haired brat. I don’t suppose you could tell me about them?”

Anko eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then slumped in weary-grief, he supposed. That and exhaustion from the combat she'd just been through, written clearly in the bloodstains across her clothes. "Obito died. Sorry, shinobi-san, but… he was crushed to death in a battle against Kiri. Orochimaru-sensei is the *best* , though, and this mission needed the best!"

Shukaku nodded, and inwardly cursed again- this wasn't how it was supposed to work. Carefully flicking the blood of his blades, he erased the seals he'd plastered over the area and shunshined away into the forest before he had to meet with *Orochimaru* . Never before had he been more grateful for the acute lack of genetics he had.

He was an issue for a later day.

Kannabi bridge got to experience the elucidating combination of Manda and extreme momentum. It didn't survive the encounter.

Shukaku failed the first and most important of his goals.

The war moved on. Without critical supply lines, Iwa and Suna eventually dropped their invasion of wind country to focus on the centuries honored tradition of which could wreck the most havoc on the other in as little time as possible.

The Sandaime Raikage was slain in battle with a group of elite Kiri jonin, and Kumo withdrew from the war in wary weariness, to lick their wounds and glare daggers at their most hated enemies. If they provided plentiful armaments to Konoha, then Kiri really didn't need to know.

As the war drew closer to a close, locked in a bloody stalemate between Konoha and Kiri as the lesser nations tore each other into piles of bloody pulp, turning on each other in furious betrayal after furious betrayal-

The world grew weary of destroying itself.

In its exhaustion, it only pushed itself to ends ever faster- stuck in their momentum, the course of things inscribed in the thousand lives won and lost-

In brutality, the world bloomed, and the terrible fruit of desperation hung heavy in its forbidden weight above two sides who both lost more than they won.

Shukaku spoke with Kokuo in the infinite permutations of plans, and in return was reminded of the *other* important event-

The whims of mortals were ever unpredictable, but Zetsu… he *delivered* .

It started in a misty forest in Kiri, where Shukaku felt a man be sacrificed on an altar of intricate seals. Felt the chakra- that burning chakra that seethed with *rage, killing intent* - and the undertones of solemn sorrow, boiling from the body in a furious storm, burning down the lines etched deep into the ground.

Guided by the furious will of five jonin shinobi and the Mizukage themselves, it pooled in an iron casket the size of a man, lighting masterworks of sealing that crawled over it in furious blue. One of the jonin simply keeled over- dead, poisoned by the Juubi's taint- while the rest slumped in exhaustion. Only the Mizukage remained standing- and for a moment, Shukaku felt as though he could see those beady, orange, *hateful* eyes…

From the distance Shukaku smiled in subtle victory. Two could play at the subtle game- a few grains of sand long since mixed into the soil of Kiri adhered themselves to the casket in whorling patterns- a tracking seal. So long as that remained, he'd always know where Isobu's prison remained.

Eventually a new rotation of jonin came, hefting the casket in unsteady hands as they leapt away into the weeping forests and

ever present mists-

Desperation was the name of the small convoy of boats that crossed the storm-wracked seas- and opportunity was Shukaku's cautious thoughts as he slipped through the cracks in the bottom of the boat, quietly entering the damp darkness of the bilge. He could *feel* the acrid tang of Isobu's chakra as it ate away at the seals containing it- could see the weary exhaustion of the lone shinobi standing guard in filthy bilgewater.

It wasn't particularly difficult to line up and gently place a stunning seal on the back of his neck, wait for the right moment, and knock the guard unconscious. What *would* be difficult, as he silently painted seals in three dimensions, hanging layer after layer of a script that really should have sprawled as large as a bijuu in a cramped bilge, was making sure the switch didn't alert *everyone* for miles around.

Bijuu were not known for their subtlety.

Laying a hand atop the casket, he let a careful sliver of his chakra feed into the seals as he dropped into the shared mindscape. "Isobu." He stood on the edge of that stone eternity, where the foundation of their mindscape crumbled away into an infinite darkness of lapping waves and *chains* - eternities and eternities of chains. " *Isobu* ."

A quiet rattling echoed in the background, and an *eye*- infinitely far away, yet so brilliantly desperate as to be *right there* , opened wide in the darkness. "...Shukaku? Are… are you really there? I've been alone with the mean people for so long…"

"Yeah. Isobu, I'm here. You're going to be free- but you have to be absolutely still."

"Why?" A hint of *anger* , the Juubi's wrath amplified against the true anger of a bijuu. "Don't… just break the seal, and then we can kill them *all* . They dared to chain us, Shukaku. They chained us like father chained the Juubi… I just want to go back to my reefs."

Peace , he begged in the twisted confluence of chakra, the interconnection that was the basis of all ninshu. “I’m taking your place.”

“What! No! Shuku- you can’t do that! Then they’ll seal you *too!* ”

“Be still. Please, Isobu, this is *important* .” Slowly, the chains started to unwind as the seals he inscribed into the air, into the wood and iron casket came to life. “I’m a sealing master, remember? I’m doing this on *my* terms. The last of the chains came undone as the current pulled him into the darkness, dragging a barely-calm Isobu out in exchange.

That lone eye looked at him in quiet confusion, a silent question in a moment of passing as chains started to crash down around Shukaku’s form- yet, not chains of iron, but *paper* , in rings and rings- in this, Shukaku was lord over their space. “Why, Shukaku?”

“You’ll understand one day.” He brushed the tip of tail across Isobu’s shell, quietly reminding him, of family, for hope- “there’s a glass spike I left atop the casket. I've made it take you to the seas just off the coast of wave. Kokuo will be there- stay low, stay *free* . For father’s dream-” the last chains of paper and glass crashed down into the water around him, binding him to stillness- and he watched, two golden to a single sorrowful gaze, as the ripple of his space-time seal pulled at the last trace of his brother. “I will always love you, Isobu-” and he was alone.

Shukaku smiled, and settled to sleep.

The screams- he heard the screams before he felt them pull at his chakra, pouring their energy into seals that would have kept Isobu beneath their binding, but only snapped his. Sand poured from the coffin’s lid, tracing the lines of chakra and *stabbing* , in heart after heart. Shukaku felt the stick binding of blood as it cascaded over his form, the faint whirl of his chakra pulling itself out of the coffin with a

single clawed hand that crushed the metal, twisting itself in folding layers of chakra-

A single girl lay bound beneath the slaughter, wide eyes staring at the slaughter around her as sand wrote itself in swirling loops across her abdomen. Faint tears spilled across her face as she stared up at the specter of death- at Shukaku, as he gently placed a finger on the center of a sealing array that stretched her entire body over. “What… what *are* you?”

Shukaku smiled- a reassuring smile, as much as he could, but he could feel the girl tremble beneath the faint afterimages of his Juubi-tainted chakra. “Quiet, now…” his voice rumbled into a deep whisper as he pulled on his chakra- from one seal to another, the perfect design he’d made- and *let it drain* .

Shukaku hummed in the quiet memory of his mother’s songs as Nohora Rin screamed beneath him. Two golden eyes blinked shut to to the dingy cave Kiri would have attempted to seal Isobu in, and opened- again, as ever, to a vast field of flowers beneath a sky that roiled in thunderous darkness, flickers of lightning cascading in the faint afterimage of a truly malicious sealing.

He could *feel* the intent poured into- thick and *evil* , a perversion of Uzumaki sealing. Go to- *images, three heads on the mountain, tired days at the hospital, mourning against a stone, cheerful- home-* Konoha. Undo the seal. *Kill them all* - and speak nothing of your plans. Like a subtle genjutsu, echoed over and again in the deepest recesses of his mind…

Well, with *him* here instead of Isobu, Konoha was safe… and if it kept her from talking about his presence- then that worked well enough.

A shiver of dread and desperate hope flickered through the winds of Rin’s mindscape as she came to. Curious, Shukaku fed a sliver of chakra to the sealing matrices that would tie his senses to hers- and heard the furiously loud chirping of a thousand birds, the brilliant

scream of lightning that burned afterimages across her eyes as *Hatake Kakashi-* and with the brilliant white hair, it couldn't be anyone else- slammed a hand through the metal binds tying her to the floor. " *Rin!* Are you okay- they didn't- do anything to you, right?"

A red sharingan spun furiously in his left eye, memorizing in perfect detail the massacre in the chamber. Rin shook her head, pale as she tried- he could feel her mindscape quiver against the flickering storm clouds above as she *tried* to warn Kakashi. "No- no I'm not- not okay. They-" she choked, gasping for breath as a flicker of lightning shivered in her larynx. "You have to leave- they brought-"

"An entire *regiment* of Kiri nin is storming the woods, and you want me to *leave* ? I'm not going to abandon a comrade that easily." His face twisted into a sneer as he grabbed her arm, yanking her to her feet. "Get *up.* "

"No- you don't-" she choked on a bout of coughing, almost slumping to the ground before the faint trickle of Kakashi's killing intent caused her to stiffen in shock. "You- you *have* to leave me."

"I left Obito. Never again, Rin-" and for all Rin tried desperately not to cheer up at the thought of returning to *Konoha* , but Shukaku could feel the faint joy at a Kakashi that *cared* in the recesses of Rin's mind. "Come on." His killing intent petered out as his voice softened- just a bit- and then they were leaping through the trees of fire country with the sound of pursuit close behind. "Sensei's on the southern front fighting the Mizukage. All we have to do is wait for him to win, then he'll save us."

Rin cracked a small smile as she weakly slipped from Kakashi's grasp, stumbling into a run beside him. "You and your hero worship. How are you sure he's going to win?"

"He's *sensei* ." Shukaku thought back to Anko, and wondered if it was a prerequisite for Konoha genin to have a serious case of hero worship for their sensei. Then he thought of *Naruto* , and decided… no, probably not.

A soft giggle escaped Rin as they leapt up a cliff, sprinting across a small river and *running* - even as she screamed internally against the juinjutsu seal on her heart. A brace of exploding tags fluttered into the air as Kakashi threw them in precise motions, slapping them onto the trees as they ran- and over the sharp staccato of their detonation, Shukaku was probably the only one there who could hear the faint screams.

Stumbling to a half on the upper branches of a Hashirama tree, Kakashi shakily slid his forehead protector down over Obito's sharingan. "I… I think that's the last of the danger. We'll cover our tracks for another hour or two, then rest for the night."

"We-" Rin doubled over with a gasp of air, sharp coughing breaking apart what she'd meant to say. *Danger* - it was on the tip of her tongue- *she* was the danger- "-we should do that. That'll be enough." For the next few hours they waded through streams with their chakra tamped down close to their bodies, leaping from tree to tree in random patterns, doubling back a few times to thoroughly confuse pursuers.

As night fell upon them in washed out visions of glittering stars and the pale, luminescent light of a crescent moon, Kakashi dropped to a wary halt in the lower boughs of an immense tree. "We'll camp here. Defensible enough, and… Minato-sensei should be able to find us soon."

"It's been hours. I need to see him before we-" reach Konoha, but the words refused to make their way past her throat.

A ration bar flipped through the air toward her, neatly caught with a chunin's deftness. "Eat this. Kushina always told me she feels better after she eats."

Rin giggled softly behind a hand, eyes scanning the forest for any shadow out of place before she began to set up her tattered sleeping bag. "Kushina's silly like that. I don't think *food* will heal-" she choked

for a second, coughing raucously as the juinjutsu pulled at her chakra. “I- sorry.”

“ *It’ll help* .” Rin almost leapt off the tree at Shukaku’s voice, a kunai flying into her hand in the moment of manic terror. “ *You have more chakra. You’ll starve if you don’t eat more.* ”

Dread pooled in the pit of her stomach, like a gentle rain that pattered against a field of flowers as she dropped into a defensive crouch. When she spoke it was with a hissed whisper, furious and *fearful* . “Who’s there- show yourself!”

Kakashi shunshined to the branch in front of her, arms held out in a placating- yet still defensible stance. “Rin. Nohara Rin. We’re *alone* . Just- calm down, and get some rest.”

“No… I heard a-” she choked on nothing and keeled over against a wracking cough, eyes widening as she realized- for the juinjutsu to activate, there was only *one* source for the voice she’d heard. She shook her head hastily, clutching the ration bar hard enough to intent an imprint of a hand into it. “I… I’m just going to go to bed.”

In the mindscape above Shukaku, the juinjutsu flickered in endless patterns of lightning, and wept in sheets of cascading rain as she drifted off to sleep.

“ *Wake up!* ” Shukaku’s voice roared through Rin’s mind with a slight crackle of chakra, slamming her to awareness in an instant. “ *They’re catching up. You need to run!* ”

She threw her medical pack onto her back, whispering faintly under her breath in agonized response. “They- they won’t kill me. Because-” she let her sentence trail off instead of risking the juinjutsu’s activation.

“ *They’ll kill Kakashi, though.* ” Eyes widening in horror Rin quickly jumped down to where Kakashi had already set up a gauntlet of

traps to slow down their enemies just a few moments more, kunai clenched in her hand. Barely a glance was shared between them as they raced onwards-

To *Konoha* , where the juinjutsu whispered its sadistic threats of death and destruction, and clamped its cold grip over her heart.

Their pursuit was far more difficult to evade this time- every movement, every jump from tree to tree felt as though they were right behind. Each flash of a kunai as it flew out of the darkness almost felt as if they were being *herded* .

They were. Shukaku *knew* they were.

Soon. He could feel it- could feel Rin's will- of fire- as she came to the only conclusion she could against a juinjutsu that bound her will and prevented her from even honorable suicide. Could feel the flowers in the garden of her mind wilt beneath a pounding rain, as the juinjutsu roared in the heavens above him-

" *Don't.* " Rin flinched at his voice, rubbing faintly at her spot on her chest where his burning chakra had since started to gently mix with her own, carefully held away from her coils. To her, it would have been little but a faint prickling and a sense of *wrongness* . " *Don't do it.* "

"I must." Chidori sang in the brilliance of a thousand promises made to be broken, as ever did fate- the sound of kunai on kunai and the clash of metal, the cries of the wounded as a single boy faced against several elite teams of Kiri shinobi. "We were never supposed to make it out of this alive, anyways…"

She ducked into a shunshin just as the entire clearing lit up under the electric-blue incandescence of Kakashi's chidori, and *leapt.*

" *Stupid girl!* " Cursing himself for ever thinking anything would ever be easy he *pushed* all the chakra he kneaded together with hers out of her body, matching for a single moment her will to *be fast enough*

. For a moment, just one, they were in unison- and from that he shunted the entire length of his tail from her back in a boil of truly intense killing intent, hanging it to look like Isobu's.

The last thing the Kiri shinobi in the clearing saw was a rush of shell and acrid chakra speeding towards them, too fast to dodge.

The last thing Kakashi saw before he crumpled from exhaustion and shock was his teammate impaled through the chest on his Chidori, horrified.

The last thing Obito saw before Shukaku sensed a white Zetsu pulling him away was his two teammates, crumpled to the ground in a pool of blood and carnage.

The only thing Shukaku felt was that Rin had just gone and messed up his *other* chance to pry Obito from black Zetsu's clutches-

And the rain in Rin's mind ever crashed down, cascading off the petals of burnt flowers as a yellow-haired man dropped the ground beside them with nary a flicker of movement. "Hey…" his voice was… peaceful. Determined, *exhausted* , but kind. "Let's get everyone back to Konoha, alright?"

The last thing Rin felt before her sensei quietly knocked her unconscious was the incontrovertible certainty that she'd *failed* .

Rin woke. This surprised her enough for Shukaku to see the faint echoes of stunned shock across the flowers of her mindscape.

Her chakra fluttered in distress- in the *unending need* to free the bijuu locked within her, smashing in a rudimentary seal-breaking technique against a seal that would not shatter. Bitter tears pooled at the edge of her eyes as she tried to destroy her home, and failed to save it-

“Hey!” Her eyes widened as she heard a voice she’d recognise anywhere. *Her sensei* . Namikaze Minato sat in a comfortable looking chair but *feet* from her, and she tried to weakly push herself away. Anything to make sure he wasn’t caught in her own self destruction. “Woah! Calm down- there’s no need to be all jumpy- we’re all safe back in-” Konoha. *Konoha* . The whole of her mindscape shivered as lightning crashed down, trying and failing to pull at Shukaku’s chakra through a too-strong seal. “Rin. Calm down.”

Rin just shook her head, eyes wide as she shakily pointed towards a kunai.

“Rin…” for a moment, Minato just looked… weary. “That’s not the answer. I’m not sure what they did to you, but we’ll figure it out together. We’re safe now! Cheer up- nothing bad’s gonna happen to you-”

Let it never be said that Madara’s cursed seal didn’t appreciate a good bit of irony. In the moment in paused, parsing the confused flicker of hope, desperation, anger- sorrow- he pushed chakra into it’s matrices, scribing in sand a counterseal in the breadth of a moment- and in the next, poured the totality of his self into the seal he’d written over the entire hospital room for *this exact moment.*

Minato’s eyes widened, lines of sand lighting up in brilliant blue-

Chakra fluttered against a seal on his back- *hiraishin* , Shukaku analyzed as his chakra leapt from the seals scribed neatly over Rin’s skin. He *stayed* though, bound in place by the eight star seal he’d written carefully into the foundation of the room.

Lines of sand traced themselves over Minato’s skin, swirling and swirling, circles in- more complex than almost any other seal he’d made, carefully interlocking with his chakra system. A seal Shukaku had practiced for *years* in preparation of this very moment-

Shukaku slipped quietly out of Nohara Rin, and settled calmly into the chakra coils of Konoha’s Yellow Flash, Namikaze Minato.

Rin and her sensei locked eyes, the first on the edge of tears, the second holding back maniac laugher as an incredulous, too-bright, *disbelieving* grin stretched across his face. “Damn.” His voice was a breathy whisper as he pulled at his hiraishin again, flashing away. “They’re never going to make me Hokage now.”

Shukaku: I've heard that you're the only shinobi who's both powerful and mentally stable.

Minato: ?

Shukaku: I'm here to fix that.

And now: the main part of the plot is nigh!

One and Nine

Chapter 18: One and Nine

Shukaku just breathed, letting his chakra circulate through Minato's coils in quiet revolutions, just apart from his own- the acrid taint never quite burning through him. A piece of comfort, he hoped- "We were always like this, to each other- before humans forced us into the far fringes of society. It was our father's ideology- to understand is to love, to love is failing to hate. Namikaze Minato, I have chosen you for great things."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"So this is what my head's like." Shukaku turned, eyes locking on the form of Namikaze Minato as he stepped into his mindscape for the first time, eyes skittering across everything *but* the bijuu standing before him.

Minato's mindscape was beautifully barren- an empty sea of clouds and sky, spread out across infinite distance, slowly shifting through the shape of a hundred carefully constructed fuuinjutsu. It was- logical, orderly- *kind* . Rin's mind had been similar, if somewhat more vibrant- flowers and verdant growths spilling across everything in an expression of how much she *lived* for Konoha. "It's my favorite, so far." He remembered his own, if only faintly- the echoes of a bedroom that should have been forgotten, memories…

Minato narrowed his eyes, chakra flaring in intricate patterns as he built a seal before Shukaku's eyes, vast sweeps of chakra coalescing across in shadowed spirals on azure skies. "Kiri made a mistake sealing you in me. If they expected you to be free to rampage, then they picked the wrong person."

Shukaku laughed softly, complex fuuinjutsu of sand floating off his form to bind Minato's, wrapping around his advanced- but human, so very limited- seals in mere whispers of Shukaku's capability. "How arrogant, to assume *they* were the ones responsible for this. No, Namikaze- I've chosen you for great things."

The man who would be- still could be- Hokage's eyes narrowed in determination. In *threat* . Killing intent filled the air between them, sharp and *purposeful* . "I won't listen to anything you say. You can't lead me astray, Ichibi."

"I wish it were only that easy?" Shukaku swept his tail out, chakra burning through Minato's coils as the blow caught against him, throwing him from the mindscape. " *Think about it, Minato. You've done a good job protecting your precious people- now you just need to do a little* more."

Gasping, Minato doubled over in his bedroom, faint anger draining from a perfectly controlled psyche as he smoothed out the flow of his chakra and carefully smoothed his chakra. Shukaku watched in interest as he pulled himself through some sort of ritual- carefully checking each of his tri-pronged kunai, sliding them into the brace on his arms one by one, unsealing and resealing a small arsenal of fuuinjutsu supplies.

It was an interesting form of meditation- and by the time he stepped out of his bedroom, Shukaku watched as his chakra settled into an uneasy calm. His house was… odd, for what Shukaku had guessed of his character- far too lively, random shinobi tools scattered around on chairs and shelves- but never the floor… lived in.

The door *slammed* open with frankly more force than necessary, bouncing off the wall and almost latching itself back closed before a hand snapped out to catch the handle. "Hey! I'm home! Bet you were all like- oh no, gotta go get the Mizukage, I miss my wife *so* much-" Kushina froze in the doorway as she entered, narrowing her eyes slightly as she looked at Minato. "Hey. You're looking a little down, huh? What happened?"

Minato ran a hand through his hair sheepishly, grinning uneasily at Kushina as Shukaku chuckled in the back of his mind. “ *This explains so much about the house…* ”

“Hey, she’s not that messy!” He blanched as Kushina just… *looked* at him with a quizzical intrigue, head tilted to the side in somewhat adorable confusion.

“You’re acting kinda funny, ya know. Hey- oh! Is it Kakashi?” She clasped her hands to her mouth to hide a grin as she hopped from one foot the other in energetic excitement, eyes twinkling brightly. “Did he finally admit he really really loves his ninken- or, or- is it Rin? Did she get a hospital job, or a medic- or, something? No… huh, um- no, don’t respond, let me think…”

“ *I expected a lot of the jinchuurki that keeps my most foolish brother contained, but… somehow, this is more.* ”

Minato blinked, nodding in dreamy agreement. “Yeah, she can be like that-”

“Hey! Who’re you talking to? They better not be… saying…” she *sniffed* at the air faintly, eyebrows raised in quiet confusion. “Huh… that’s- hey! You’re not Minto!” Golden chains spilled from her back with a frantic rattling, slamming into Minato and pinning him against the wall with the same sort of unnecessary force she’d used on the door. “You’re a real bad imposter, ya know? Tell me what you did to Minato!”

“Um- I- uh!” Minato looked *really* flustered at being pinned to the wall by Kushina, and Shukaku couldn’t help but laugh at him from within the mindscape, which probably wasn’t helping anyone. “I *am* Minato- calm down, look for the signs of a henge. I have fingerprints, my hair is the same color, and that one scar you gave me on my birthday is still-”

“Yeah, but you *could* be- a clone! Or maybe Tobriama-sama was like- this upstart! Then, he went a Yamanaka and *bam* , fake Minato!”

Her voice rose as she spoke, hair raising into the air in nine flowing streams. It really *did* look remarkably like Kurama's tails.

Shukaku sighed softly in exasperation. Common sense, apparently, was something red haired humans lacked universally. " *Use hiraishin."*

"Right!" They *disappeared* , space twisting around them for a moment as they flashed over to the nearest seal, which'd been applied to one of the dining chairs. "Look, Kushina, there's no way an infiltrator would have learned-" his eyes widened for a moment before he ducked out of the way of his wife's adamantine chains, watching in helpless agony as their fancy table was smashed to so many splinters.

"Just- stay still idiot! I'm gonna wring your neck when I get ahold of you!" A faint growl echoed in the register of her voice at the end of her sentence, chains wrapping defensibly around her body before they shot out towards Minato with deadly grace. "If you're all Yamanaka-ed, then cause' Tobirama's decided to kill you, he could have taught hirashin to the replacement!"

"Kushina! You're taking this out of proportion! You *know* me-"

"Yeah! And you're always sissy and clean, but now you're *dirty* . I can smell it!"

Shukaku blinked, then groaned in frustration as it clicked. Trust an Uzumaki to be a sensor and not even *know* about it. " *Show her the seal. She's confused because your chakra signature changed when you gained another affinity.* "

Minato's voice was suspiciously high as he dodged another set of chains. "You're telling me I gained another *affinity* ? Oh, that'd solve…" gulping down a deep breath, flutters of anxiety fluttering through the clouds in his mindscape, he pulled aside his jonin vest and fiddled with the buttons on his shirt.

Kushina blushed deep red, before her chains redoubled her efforts. “Nuh uh! You’re *not* pulling this on me, Minato-clone… oh.” The characters stood out against his skin, gleaming sandy gold as Shukaku’s chakra moved through them in calm cycles. “Oh kami.” Her chains crashed to the ground. “We’re so screwed, aren’t we?”

“At least I’m the real Minato?” Minato tried for a smile.

For some reason, Kushina didn’t look amused.

“Okay! Jinchuuriki how-to, go!” They’d relocated to a forest somewhere in the land of rivers, far enough away from the action that two of Konoha’s strongest Jounin shouldn’t be in any significant danger. “So, first- willpower. You have to have like a- desire? Constant, yeah- you need a constant desire to keep your bijuu contained, *especially* if you have a poor seal like I suspect. It’s like mental health stuff, and you’re good at that, so you’ll be fine. Just… imagine putting it in a box.”

Shukaku snorted softly. “ *Good luck with that* .”

Minato winced at the voice. “The Ichibi wished me good luck on containing it.”

“Um, that’s probably bad, ya know. Have you looked at your seal yet?”

Minato motioned to his bare chest, where the intricate lines of sealwork plastered themselves across the gates. “I attempted a sealing when my meditation accidentally brought me into my mindscape, and the seal had some sort of automatic protection function that prevented me from completing the fuuinjustu.”

“Huh. Let me see.” She pressed her face *right* up against Minato’s chest, to which he could only respond with a furious blush. Shukaku just watched, and *laughed* . “Huh… it’s an eight point seal- three dimensional matrix… robust sealing… don’t recognize these parts…

it’s a stable seal?” She pushed off Minato, who whined softly in embarrassment. “Uh, I’m actually really confused, because- all the squigglys are in the proper places, but there’s also nothing to *contain* a bijuu. It could break out any second now.”

“Kushina. It’s *laughing* at me- and what do you *mean* it could break out any second now? Also, the defenses?”

Kushina perked up, rubbing her hands together in excitement. “Right!” Her eyes gleamed- “there are no defenses! It’s tied *really deeply* to your chakra network, but absolutely *nothing* should be stopping you from making fuuinjutsu. Like… you should still be able to apply your hiraishin seals to everything?”

Minato frowned in contemplation as he walked over to a tree, pressing a hiraishin formula into the wood before flashing back to the first mark he’d used to jump from Konoha. “It still, works, so then…”

“ *I did it* .” It was a bit nerve-wracking to explain some of the things he’d kept hidden from humanity for so long, but this was his *chosen* - the man he’d elected to carry out his will. A certain amount of honesty was required. “ *People can be remarkably blind when it comes to our intelligence.* ”

Minato gaped for a moment, before slowly beginning to construct another hiraishin mark. “When I move to place this, destroy it.” He pressed his finger against the ground, only for an extra character to unravel the mark just before it managed to imprint itself. “Oh… uh, you actually did-”

“Wait! Sissy- you’re telling me the Ichibi is a *fuuinjutsu* master?” A stomped foot blew a crater into the earth beneath them as Kushina *pouted* . “That’s no fair! I’m stuck with this *grump ball* , and you have a totally awesome sealing master!”

Shukaku laughed, low and warmly. “ *I wouldn’t want to be stuck with Kurama either* -”

“Wait, who’s Kurama?”

Kushina gasped, clutching onto her stomach as she doubled over. “Oh… he’s *really* mad now, ya know. Something about names, and humans- um, jinchuuriki how to, lesson two- go! Watch as I put the silly kitsune back in the box!” She closed her eyes, scowl marring her face for a long moment as her hair whipped about- “there! Now he’s all quiet again! It’s really not that hard.”

“ *It would be, with the seal I made.* ” There was a wryness in his voice that Shukaku could *feel* Minato tensing at. “ *The Uzumaki sealing style heavily utilizes intent to bind together esoteric concepts. My sealing style is far more robust.* ”

Focused excitement shifted somewhere deep in his mindscape as he turned his attention to Shukaku. “So you have a way of utilizing esoteric concepts without the mental hoops seal masters have to jump through? Elaborate.”

“ *If you would?* ” He reached out with a delicate sense of chakra probing at the matrix that would allow him a bit more *control* .

“How do I know you wouldn't free yourself? Or the… Kurama?” Kushina yelped in alarm at that, jumping into the nearby trees with a cocoon of chains rattling around her. “A faustian deal is still a deal with a demon.”

Shukaku winced. “ *I would free all my siblings in a heartbeat* except *for Kurama. He… for all we’re family, he’s… not very nice?* ”

Flickers of memories danced across the clouds of his mindscape, of when Kushina had been *not herself*- “I can imagine.”

“ *The way Kushina treats him is inhumane. I would be amenable to* changing *the seal…* ” Shukaku paused, quietly reformulating his thoughts- “ *Kurama right now doesn't need to be set free to wreak havoc in the cycle of hate. He needs to meet humans who overcome that very hate, and break the cycle.* ”

Minato’s aggrieved sigh was glorious, for all he still didn’t hand over even a modicum of control. “You sound like Jiraiya-sensei-”

A faint echo of voice emanated from the trees- “you’re bijuu’s a pervert? I think I like floof better…” Minato and Shukaku paused for a second, both slowly parsing the statement before they dissolved into a fit of laughter.

“ *That was a particularly glorious misinterpretation.* ”

“You’re nice, for what I expected from a bijuu.” There was a faint hint of confusion there- the twisting overturn of a worldview slowly shattering. For all his determination- for all the willpower to do good by his village and the world, Minato had never been an idiot. When something didn't fit his pardigrim of the world, either it was wrong- or something else was.

Shukaku just *breathed* , letting his chakra circulate through Minato’s coils in quiet revolutions, just apart from his own- the acrid taint never quite burning through him. A piece of comfort, he hoped- “ *We were always like this, to each other- before humans forced us into the far fringes of society. It was our father’s ideology- to understand is to love, to love is failing to hate. Namikaze Minato, I have chosen you for* great things.”

“I don’t *understand* -” a breath of confusion, frustration as to *why* he’d been chosen flickering across his mindscape-

“One sided conversations *suck* , ya know!”

A bit of warmth- of love, and gentle humor. Shukaku pulled back his chakra- remembering, the possibilities of what had been worlds apart, and could have been again. “ *Kiri’s plan failed the moment I interceded. They meant to seal Isobu- the Sanbi- inside of one Nohara Rin, and have her unleash it on Konoha.* ” He could almost *see* everything come together in Minato’s mind as he connected the various faint threads, snippets of information coming together to form a gruesome picture. “ *Your student was destined to die on Kakashi’s*

chidori. I changed that. The world's destiny… I plan to change that too. "

Minato was silent for a long time, mindscape rumbling in a peculiar mixture of distress and intense thought- a quiet ponderance he dared not peer deeper within. It was Minato's mind, after all. "Ichibi…" a thread of chakra slowly wound through the matrix he'd been probing at earlier, quietly *permissive* - and Shukaku couldn't help but grin. "Don't make me regret this."

"Hey!" Kushina jumped down, a glower fixed onto her face. "Jinchuuriki rule number zero! Don't… whoa." A stream of earth and rocks cracked and shattered into so much sand, spilling out in intricacies of seals that wove over themselves, sigils inscribing themselves into all their intricacies onto the clearing floor. "Is that the Sunaarashi style?"

He spoke with Minato's voice, laced with impossibly deep reverberations- "The Sunaarashi use *my* style." The last characters landed neatly in place, and a single twist of will sent the whole thing sinking a few feet into the sand. " *Do the honors, Minato. I could never understand how you use hiraishin, but I managed my own little bit of space-time twisting . Don't worry about not having enough chakra- you'll have mine to draw from* ."

Resolute, Minato placed a hand on the sealing matrix and *pushed* , feeling torrents of chakra push through his coils and into the ground as the air around them turned hazy with the formation of- a *seam* ripped down through the air, a tear in the fabric of the world that cut from the land of rivers to Minato's bedroom. "Kami… is that an actual *portal ?*"

"*Of course. Hiraishin isn't?*"

Minato stared at it for a moment before *laughing* , dopey grin spread across his face at the pure *possibilities* of it all. "No." He stepped through the portal, followed by a still awestruck Kushina. "No, it isn't." The seal burnt itself out of existence behind them, and the aperture

closed with a faint *snap* of displaced reality reasserting itself. “I think…. great things, huh. How very interesting.”

Shukaku’s solemn excitement bled through his chakra in return- “*You don’t know the half of it.* ”

I love writing Kushina's character. She's the best.

Minato starts getting along with Shukaku, but there's still a ways to go... and the fuuinjutsu begins!

Good Parenting

Chapter 19: Good Parenting

“In all things, the first step is your ascension to Hokage.”

“Well, then.” Minato stood, chakra turning inwards with a wisp of intent as they flashed to his living room. “That’ll be a problem and a half, won’t it. I’m only the second place candidate?”

“Who’s the first? Orochimaru?”

“If only…” as the forests beyond were a moment of peace, the bustling business of a village as it seethed past Minato’s window was the heart of the crowds, and Shukaku could feel Minato’s relaxed grin, soul-deep in the heart of the mindscape- “no, after Hiruzen-sama was slain, the Nidaime only really has eyes for one successor.” Inside him, Shukaku drew a blank- that wasn’t supposed to happen. Hiruzen was supposed to be alive- and he dreaded what he’d hear- “one Shimura Danzo.”

Sometimes, he hated being right.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

They stood together at the edge of Konoha- one still settling into his coils, the other carefully exercising his new affinity, crushing and reforming a pebble in his hand. “It’s moments like these that make me love my village, Ichibi-san. The peace, the *unity* of all things together in this little hidden world of ours.”

Shukaku sent back gentle affirmation, looking out to the forests and remembering- so many things, mere years away. “ *In all things, the first step is your ascension to Hokage.* ”

“Well, then.” Minato stood, chakra turning inwards with a wisp of intent as they flashed to his living room. “That’ll be a problem and a half, won’t it. I’m only the *second* place candidate?”

“ *Who’s the first? Orochimaru?* ”

“If only…” as the forests beyond were a moment of peace, the bustling *business* of a village as it seethed past Minato’s window was the heart of the crowds, and Shukaku could feel Minato’s relaxed grin, soul-deep in the heart of the mindscape- “no, after Hiruzen-sama was slain, the Nidaime only really has eyes for *one* successor.” Inside him, Shukaku drew a blank- that wasn’t supposed to happen. Hiruzen was supposed to be *alive* - and he dreaded what he’d hear- “one Shimura Danzo.”

Sometimes, he hated being right.

On second thought, flashing into Rin’s room after the… somewhat traumatic… experience of Shukaku’s jump was probably not a good idea. Luckily, Minato was way past skilled enough to duck out of the way of Rin’s desperate kunai throw. The explosive tag tied to its hilt… not so much.

The hospital staff rushed into the room to find an inconsolable Rin sobbing into Minato’s shoulder, furiously glaring at him all the while. In Shukaku’s opinion, it was a rather confusing moment that could have been avoided with even a small modicum of proper communication…

Anyways, they’d found themselves locked out of the hospital with a blanket ban from visiting anyone inside.

Of course, Minato was going to visit Rin anyway. “ *This is a bad idea.* ”

“ *What would* you *know about it* ?” He leapt neatly up to the roof just opposite of the hospital, carefully tamping down his chakra until it

almost matched the background hum of nature. “ *She’s* my *student- she needs someone to comfort her through this trying time.* ” Minato had gotten remarkably good at speaking to him without blurting out any embarrassing thoughts, which… that was good, Shukaku supposed.

“ *Ah.* ” He tried to send a little bit of embarrassment to Minato through his chakra. “ *I forgot about that, sometimes. I might have fixated a bit on how much those hospital staff will* kill *you if they find you in Rin’s room. Again.* ”

“ *Don’t I know it* .” Minato didn’t groan in exasperation, as he was a well trained assasin, but the internal shift of annoyance in his chakra was clear enough. “ *They went through the entire room and removed* all *of my hiraishin tags! So unfair.* ”

“ *Impressive, though* .” Needless to say was how… poorly the girl had reacted the last time Minato flashed into her room. A kunai sailed unnoticeably through the air, landing silently on the inch of wood someone had left in a ventilation shaft after repairs. Chakra swirled in intent and non-euclidian patterns, and from where they’d been, they were suddenly *not*- there, landing softly on the hospital roof. “ *That has to be the most complicated jutsu I’ve ever seen. I’m still astounded that Tobirama and you figured it out.* ”

“ *Well, thanks. I’ll be keeping it to me and Tobirama-sama, for now. I don’t trust you.* ” Slipping past the sole genin guard on the hospital roof was beyond easy- making their way through the layers of defensive fuuinjustu binding the entrances shut was… much harder. “ *Who even designed this?* ”

“*So mean. It looks like Uzumaki work. Here*-” the faint echoes of his amusement laced his chakra as he pushed it through Minato’s coils, perfectly controlled- a wisp of sand rose from the pockets in his jounin uniform, twisting into a detailed counterseal that neatly redirected the chakra through the seals. “*There. Easy enough.*”

“ *How’d you do that?* ” Minato crept across the hospital roofs, no little bit of envy in his words as he delicately laid hiraishin seals down at every intersection. “ *That looked… unique.”* They’d made it to the floor Rin *had* been on with remarkably little trouble- but, as they’d more or less expected, the half-destroyed room she’d been in previously had been vacated.

“ *Well, thanks.* ” Minato wasn’t a genius for nothing- he caught *exactly* where Shukaku was going before he even spoke a third word in that particularly sarcastic voice he’d adopted- “ *I’ll be keeping it to myself for now. I don’t- well.* ”

“ *Um… trade?* ” Minato stilled in focus as they reached the last and most important gauntlet of their mission- noticeably stealing the hospital registry to find *exactly* which room Rin was supposed to be in. They’d assigned a chunin guard to records room- a sensor, by the looks of how they’d react to each med-nin’s chakra signature *before* they passed the corner.

“ *How good are you at sage mode?* ”

Minato’s chakra fluctuated a bit in surprise. “ *Sage mode? I’m able to keep the energies balanced, but never found a good use for it in combat. Fukasaku and Shima are almost always with Jiraiya on his missions, and the power’s not particularly necessary for the sort of high-speed combat I’m used to.* ”

“ *Sage mode completely erases one’s chakra signature. Theoretically, I could give you sage chakra-* ” he kept speaking over the somewhat inevitable exclamation of denial from Minato- *“but I’m also confident that the chakra recoil from kage bunshin would also work well enough* .”

“ *That’s… legitimately genius.* ” His hands flicked to the cross-shaped seal, a quiet murmur of focus complementing the subtle poof of smoke as a second Minato appeared- both wearing identically stunned expressions. “ *That was… much easier than usual.* ”

“ *You have more chakra now. Almost thirty percent more- I’ve been* very *carefully expanding your reserves.* ” Shukaku smirked as the clone sat still against the ceiling, natural chakra quietly suffusing its form. *“You might want to keep on top of your chakra control…* ” Minto rolled his eyes, pulling a piece of paper out of a seal and quickly inscribing a hiraishin formula on it before slipping it into one of the treatment files carried by a particularly unobservant nurse in an almost instantaneous hiraishin exchange. Even Shukaku had to admit, the sheer speed of it was *impressive* .

Breathing deeply and settling into perfect stillness, he formed the cross seal again to dispel the shadow clone. Shukaku *felt* as the natural chakra swept into his coils, gently swept into perfect balance with practiced ease. Then they were gone, flashed into the room. Everything was under a light genjutsu seal, but Minato had obviously been given access to the passcodes at some point in time, and quickly found the room registry.

Room three-twelve- Nohara Rin. Recovering from injuries, mental trauma, and extensive chakra overabundance and poisoning. *Perfect*- and, much less welcome, a different name only five rooms over- Hatake Kakashi. Recovering from training related chakra exhaustion compounded with sharingan overexertion. “ *Right.* ” Minato’s sigh was just quiet enough not to be overheard as they flashed away to one of the earlier hiraishin marks. “ *I’m far too tired to be dealing with this right now.* ”

Shukaku sniggered in his mind. “ *New mission- keep Kakashi* in *the hospital* .”

Rin reacted a lot better the next time Minato dropped into her room unannounced. Four explosive-tag marked kunai whistled neatly through the air at them as they entered the door, followed by two shuriken- enough to hide the water release: heavenly weeping senborn beneath them.

Unfortunately, Minato was also more prepared- and the preparations of a jonin were far, *far* more extensive than Rin's admirable- if futile- attempt. The original slapped two sealing tags onto the wall- a single silencing tag and and a chakra-muting tag, while the kage bunshin he'd made earlier easily intercepted the kunai before flashing away to Kusa or somewhere. "Rin! Rin- I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not upset at you-"

"But *it* could hurt me." Her face was… determined. Worried, but resolute. Befitting of someone who'd almost killed herself for her village. "It's my *duty* , sensei, to eliminate any threats to Konoha- and that *thing* is a threat."

Minato sighed, pulling up a chair to the bedside. "Rin… what do you know about the bijuu?"

"Um… not much? They're natural disasters, but Shodai-sama sealed them away with the help of the Uzumaki, and they were then sold to the five great nations as part of the peace treaty that Suna broke."

"You had a tailed beast sealed within you." Rin's gasp of horror and immediate dive for a kunai was… somewhat concerning. Admirable will, but that probably shouldn't have been her first thought to everything juinjutsu related- Obito related trauma, perhaps… "It's nothing to worry about- not for you, anymore. It's sealed inside of *me* now- and you know me. I'm *very* good at fuuinjustu."

"So you… sealed it away, properly?" The relief on her face was palpable, even as Minato carefully *didn't* confirm that as the truth. Merely… allowed her to make her own conclusions. "It was so *scary* , sensei- I don't *want* to destroy Konoha. I… if it was only me, though, then it would be the lives of everyone else. I just had to…"

"It won't change how I interact with you. I'll tell you a secret- Kushina's the jinchuuriki to the Kyuubi, and she's still normal."

Rin pulled a face. "I'm not sure anyone has ever called Kushina *normal* , sensei. I'm pretty sure she has several thousand percent

daily sodium intake every time she goes out to eat ramen."

Chukling, Minato pulled her into a loose hug, brushing her hair back against as she softly sobbed into her shoulder. "You're a strong kunoichi, Rin- don't let this ruin you. It'll be hard, but just remember, Kushina and I are always there for you." He pulled back, ruffling her hair one more time. "I hope I don't have to impress on you how *absolutely secret* all this information is? Tell *nobody* about the Ichibi, *or* the Kyuubi, okay? If they ask, then it was just a particularly nasty cursed seal."

Shukaku glanced back to focus in gentle confusion. " *Why keep it a secret? I thought you were going to report it as soon as possible.* "

" *For now, until I've decided what I intend on doing, then we can keep it a secret. I don't trust you, but I also won't dismiss convincing arguments without at least considering them.* "

A smirk clambered neatly across Shukaku's face. " *You just want to learn fuuinjutu from me* ."

" *...maybe* ." His chakra bent in that peculiar way that was *hiraishin* , and they were standing beside Kakashi in the space of an instant. There were an impressive amount of traps around the room that looked like they'd been set by someone both drunk and dumb- or, in other words, seriously chakra exhausted.

Minato's hand landed on Kakashi's shoulder in a flash- lightly, but in his weakened state, firmly enough to keep him from tumbling out of the window as he'd planned. "So, my cute little student. Going somewhere."

Kakashi paled slightly, before sulkily moving back through the room. "Bed. I'm going back to my hospital bed."

"That's what I thought." Kakashi opened his mouth as if to say something, only for Minato to speak over him with an easy cheer- "I sure hope you weren't going to try and get out of the hospital early,

because I heard Kushina was really looking for someone to work with…" if Kakashi's- even more- pale face was anything to go by, the threat was particularly effective. "Rin would be upset if after everything you went through together, you went and killed yourself from chakra exhaustion."

"...fine. Sensei."

"Great!" He gave him one last pointed stare before flashing back to his bedroom. " *So, Ichibi… great things, you said? How about we start with fuuinjustu?* "

" *So long as you teach me hiraishin, I'll teach you my sealing style- tanuki script!* " Ah, it was nice to finally, *finally* tell someone the name for his fuuinjustu style. Minato's poor opinion didn't count, though- he was *terrible* at naming things, and had *no* ground to stand on…

The hiraishin was *genius* . He'd told that to Minato no shortage of times, and had started to get exasperated responses towards the latter end of their lesson. Most space-time seals required routing through a separate dimension, which made moving living things, large objects, and a fair few other random qualifications, *very* difficult. His personal space-time seal, complicated as it was, overcame that by actually bending the two points in space together- creating a wormhole where anything could just… walk from one point to another.

Hiraishin was elegant in its simplicity, patched together with a breathtaking assortment of intent-based seals, and still somehow a faster option than several hundred years of his own careful seal-work.

The concept was as so- why use *four* dimensions, when you could use *two?* Instead of routing through an external dimension, simply treat the *entire universe* as if it was a two-dimensional plane, with the hiraishin-marks as the only three-dimensional points the technique could interact with.

Genius. He'd say it again, but Minato would probably get annoyed at him.

More than he already had, that was…

Kushina arrived home to a bowl of steaming ramen and a neatly set table, which- Shukaku could relate with Minato's frustrated confusion when Kushina *immediately* glared at him. "You made me ramen, ya know? That means you're gonna say something *dumb* -"

"Uh…" the jonin smiled sheepishly and pushed the bowl forward. Kushina looked askance at it for a moment before slowly- *very slowly* , eyes locked quizzically onto Minato's own- she started eating the delectable treat. "I just wanted to set the mood-"

"For whatever stupid thing you're going to tell me! Well? I'm not gonna wait all *day* - spit it out, sissy!" In the back of Minato's mind, Shukaku laughed twice over- against Minato's panic, and for Kurama's misfortune, having to deal with *that* all the time.

"I decided to go for Hokage!" At least she looked thoughtful, rather than murderous. Definitely an improvement, Shukaku supposed. "Like- seriously go for Hokage, not just be the second-best choice."

"What prompted you to change your mind, ya know?"

"Well… this is going to sound weird, but the Ichibi *really* believes in me. It's… he's just so supremely *confident* in how good of a Hokage I'd make." Shukaku couldn't prevent the shocked, warm grin that'd stolen across his face at Minato's words. "I just… it made me actually *believe* I could do it- like, go out of my way to actually *become* Hokage, not just get appointed."

Kushina looked a little pale. "You're letting the *Ichibi* influence you into an *important life decision* ? That's like- super bad! You can't listen…" she wilted a bit under Minato's dry *stare* . "Um… the bijuu

aren’t good moral compasses. The Kyuubi would do *anything* to kill me, so… be careful.”

A slow now was all that Kushina got in response- acknowledgement, but laced with a soul-deep sense of determination- Minato knew what he wanted, and he’d *go for it.* “I understand… I know how hard it’s been for you with the Kyuubi, but I think the Ichibi’s at least a little different. Plus, *I* made this decision- maybe I was prompted, but it had *good* points. Think of all the good we could do with someone in the Hokage’s hat- like Jiraiya always said, sometimes we need someone to take the first step in breaking the cycle of hate.” Minato’s eyes were as deep as the sky, convicted and awash in the faint seedlings of a dream- a hope. “That could be me. It could be *us* , Kushina-”

And as they talked into the night about concerns and potentialities, of possibilities and the land of fire’s highest office-

As he dreamt of a future without war, Shukaku couldn’t help but grin.

Starlight spread above them in glittering rivers of shimmering light, gentle iridescence glimmering- a riverbed of stones and dreams across, writ celestial across the firmament. Awash in a gentle, moonless radiance Minato looked toward the skies and the skies within himself bled glittering stars of hope. “ *It’s beautiful, isn’t it, Ichibi?* ”

Shukaku smiled, and agreed. “Shukaku.” His voice rumbled with a quiet conviction, as much as Minato’s hope for a broken cycle- as much as his father’s quiet conviction that love would overcome hate. “My name is *Shukaku* -” and it was beautiful indeed.

PLOT! Plot plot plot-

It's time: plot has begun to occur once again :o

Also, Shukaku starts getting along with Minato a bit better + Minato learns how to speak to Shukaku without embarrassing himself to everyone around him.

If you thought this chapter was good, then the next chapter is so much better. Suffer as you wait >:)

Ootsutsuki Legacy

Chapter 20: Ootsutsuki Legacy

“Shukaku…” hesitance, prodded with the faintest smidgen of his chakra. He could speak what he would- “you seem unusually attentive. You’d ignored the Uzumaki well enough.”

“Ah, I guess I am.”

Another faint edge of hesitance- a small bit of fear, though why Shukaku couldn’t understand. “Does it have to do with the… Ootsutsuki legacy you mentioned earlier?”

Perceptive… he’d been called genius for a good reason, indeed. Shukaku was silent for a long moment, just… remembering. Today was a day for that, it seemed… “It was Itachi.” Those words, from the future to the past to the future again. “The tragedy of his life was a major inspiration to the Sage of Six Paths.” As Minato choked on nothing, Shukaku continued in a much smaller voice- “...our father.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Konoha bustled beneath them- vibrant, *alive* more so every day than the last. Without the Sanbi safely within their control, and with Konoha definitively *not* bijuudama-ed into so many smoking craters- and still reeling from the death of the Sandaime Mizukage- Kiri was in a bad spot. Konoha, on the other hand, had only had victory after victory against the demoralized Kiri forces.

The battle for whirlpool country had ended only a day or two ago, and the general mood in the village was a nervous excitement. What fools, Kiri, for thinking that Uzushiogakure would make a good forward base against *the Uzumaki clan* - the few that survived from

the endless gauntlet of traps and deadly assaults retreated back to the land of water severely demoralized and significantly wounded.

Minato stared at the people of his *home* from where he crouched on the rooftop, and just watched. All of these… they didn't know how tenuous the balance of the future held itself. " *Konoha was always a democracy… it's not really remembered anymore, because, traditionally, the Hokage chooses their successor, but originally the clans voted for their Kage.* "

" *Then we need to speak to the clans.* "

A soft nod. " *Most of them are spoken for. The Senju will follow Tobirama's word- he's the clan head, small as they are. The Yamanaka and Akimichi will follow the Nara, and nobody knows how they decide anything. The Hyuuga will follow the Uchiha, even if they grumble all the way, and the Aburame will follow a logical vote with the majority, excluding extenuating circumstances.* "

A few things made a bit more sense to Shukaku now. Danzo's level of political influence had seemed… odd to him, but if all one needed was to manipulate a single lever to pull all of Konoha… " *The Uchiha. They're the centerpoint to this.* "

"And the Uzumaki." Shukaku sent a faint agreement in startled reminder- it was hard to remember sometimes, compared to his memories of a life long past, that the Uzumaki clan were *here* in Konoha. " *The Ootsutsuki legacy. Fitting, that those two clans are the ones who will decide the course of fate. Again…* "

A faint curiosity shivered the clouds in Minato's mindscape, but Shukaku pushed it easily aside- not now. Now was the time to talk to the clans- the descendants…

The Uzumaki were just as bright and exuberantly cheerful as Shukaku had remembered- their compound, slotted neatly into the outskirts of Konoha between the Naka river and a clearly-manmade

lake, could only be described one way. *Vivid.* Most of the buildings were painted the same eye-searing scarlet red as their hair, but the sheer variety of other colors that were splattered haphazardly over the clan grounds defied imagination.

They'd flashed over to a hiraishin mark on one of the Hashirama trees, and the moment Minato took to adjust certainly wasn't for *his* benefit. " *You don't understand, Shukaku.* " There was a faint shiver of *wariness* in his voice- in his chakra.

" *I understand perfectly well. I lived with the Uzumaki for almost fifty years, once.* " There was a sudden spike of interest, but he waved it off for later. " *The Sunaarashi use… used my style, remember* ?"

" *Right. Well… just imagine- we're going into an* entire compound *full of Kushinas.* " The exaggerated shiver of horror that flickered through his mindscape *was* exaggerated. A little bit. *"See the lanterns hanging everywhere? They're throwing a party* ."

" *For what?* "

Minato dropped from the tree, gently walking over to greet the two guards standing forlornly at the open gate. " *The end of the war, probably* ." Shukaku didn't even need to point out that the war hadn't ended yet- they both understood the logic of the Uzumaki, and the particular way it just so happened to leap a few steps too far. A courteous bow was the only move he made as they stopped in front of the pair of guards. "We're here to see Akane-sama."

"Well? She's not here, that's for sure." The sheer *density* of his chakra echoed his forlorn sadness almost enough for Shukaku to *feel* it. "Probably enjoying the party, or something, while *we're* out here… hey, you're Kushina's boyfriend, right? The sissy one?"

Shukaku barely restrained his raucous laughter as Minato winced. What a thing to be known for. "...yes. That's me. I'd like to speak to her on some political issues-"

“Well, go speak to *her* , no *us* , ya know *!* We sure don’t care about that- she’ll probably find it fascinating, or whatever goes through her mind nowadays… so sad.” Minato looked pointedly at him, then at the fuuinjutsu-inscribed stone that ran beneath the gate. Then again, because the guard was too busy glaring at them for not moving to deactivate the barrier jutsu. “Uh- right! Sorry, um, Minato?”

“...yes.” There was a sigh hidden somewhere in there. A faint whisper of chakra built in his hands, flowing into the gate and deactivating the fuuinjutsu with a flash of light. “Have fun! Unlike *us…* ” inside the barrier *loud* was added onto the other parts of vibrant- explosive music, the crash of fireworks, and a sort of all-encompassing chatter that washed over them in an instant.

The Uzumaki compound had a festival air to it- and Minato wanted *no* part of it. Shukaku could really care less either, so the way they bounded across the rooftops at Minato’s impressive speed until they slipped in through the window of the clan head’s home was somewhat understandable. “Akane-sama-”

The woman, who looked so much like a younger version of *his* Akane that something within himself ground in the long memories of sorrow, glanced up to meet Minato’s eyes with complete disinterest. “I was expecting you’d come here ever since the guards pulled down the wards for you. Wait a second, would you-” the door at the far end of the room *slammed* open as Kushina tumbled in, excited smile written clearly across her face- “for the others to arrive, would you?”

“Minato! I was- and they you’d been like all those months ago ‘ no, I’m *never* gonna come to one of your crazy parties,’ but now you’re here and you *have* to try Mio’s pastries, they’re the best- you’ll come to all the parties, then, and then-” Shukaku, at the very least, was afforded the luxury to just… turn off his perception of the outside world as Kushina rambled on about parties, Minato, and whatever else she was want to say.

“Kushina…” a quiet sigh was the only thing he heard in the mindscape of the seal- “ *Kushina.* Kushina! I’ll go to the party with

you-”

Kushina jumped up, pumping a fist into the air. “ *Yes* ! I *knew*- ”

“ *After* I talk with Akane-sama about my agenda.” Akane perked up slightly at that, and Kushina *slumped* in exaggeratedly mournful sorrow. “Kushina already knows what this is about, so she can stay, but if you have privacy barriers? I’d rather not have Uzumaki gossip spread this around the village by tomorrow.”

“So something serious, then.” Akane winked, cackling, but activated the weak barriers nonetheless. “Go on, Minato! Tell us *all* about it-”

“I intend to run for Hokage. Seriously.”

Akane blinked, clearly blindsided by the topic. “Huh… here I was, so certain you and little Kushina had finally managed… well, that’s beside the point. Hokage? I can see it- fancy hat, cool robes… better than that creep, Danzo I guess. He’s been rather… hm. Pushy when it comes to some of the more esoteric Uzumaki fuuinjutsu.”

“You’d… support me? In my endeavor?”

The Uzumaki clan head hummed noncommittally, unsealing a set of still-hot tea and passing a cup to Minato and Kushina. “Possibly. I’m not going to commit my clan so soon, but, if you’re willing to listen to a few demands of mine I’m sure we could reach an agreement.” And so it went, Akane laying out a few simple ideas, getting denied on a few absurd ones, Kushina gulping down tea and complaining about how hot it was…

Two hours later, they’d come to a simple agreement. “I think this can work. I’d be honored to have the Uzumaki clan support me.”

"One last thing, Minato.” The look on Akane’s face was more serious than it had been the entire night thus far- “I understand the shinobi world, how brutal it can be at times… but if you expect to have the

Uzumaki behind you, then it is *essential* - your goal must always, first and foremost, be *peace* .”

Minato’s grin was blinding. “I’m glad we can agree-”

Then the sanctity of the moment was broken as Kushina wrapped a chain around his waist in a rattle of chakra and metal, pulling him out of the door into the- horror of horrors, *party* . Minato didn’t even have the decency to let him shut out the world- every time he’d try and shrink back from the exuberance, he’d badger him about something inane until he surfaced to see *more Uzumaki insanity* .

A fitting end to a night amongst *that* clan…

The Uchiha… every face reminded him so much of Indra before Zetsu had gotten to him- that subtly arrogant glare, yet still *protective* . The gentle way they would look at the compound around them, at the children who tumbled through the grass and trees- the soft smiles hidden behind blank faces…

The Uzumaki might have inherited Asura’s chakra, but it was the Uchiha who’d made Indra’s attitude into a culture.

The biting chill of a late spring morning still clung to the air in the faint mists that drifted along the edges of shadow as they stepped into the Uchiha compound, so many pairs of bloody, scarlet eyes focused on them as they walked through orderly streets. Past perfectly maintained flower-beds and geometric patterns in the flagstones- all the subtle, austere uses of the Sharingan’s perfect recall and pattern recognition.

Past the hanging banners and neatly painted walls, gently carved stonework and shadows of sunlight wrought into the Uchiha fan, their family crest. Indra’s subtle signature on the world, even so far into the future.

It was as beautiful as the Uzumaki compound, if different- where the Uzumaki had been overly *upfront* in their energetic boisterousness, the Uchiha hid behind layers of tradition and careful meanings, subtle symbolism that Shukaku doubted they even still understood. Once he saw an old piece of stonework- depicting the legend of Amaterasu, with the Ootsutsuki's sun and moon symbol stitched neatly across her robes in silent memory.

He didn't know whether to laugh as all that had been forgotten, or weep for family he'd failed. He chose to do neither, instead sitting in sullen silence as Minato deftly walked through the many traditions inherent to formally greeting a clan head he knew well enough, watching carefully as the other Uchiha curiously observed the proceedings.

"...come inside, if you would Minato. We'd be honored to host you for a short while." Fugaku bowed shallowly- almost arrogantly, if Shukaku was reading the gesture correctly, before striding neatly into the room with Minato on his heels. "Tea?"

"If you'd be so kind." Shukaku got the impression that Fugaku's tea was *terrible* , and by the somewhat pinched expression on the man's face, he agreed.

"I'll have Itachi make it for us, as Mikoto is otherwise indisposed." Fighting for her life on the front went unsaid, but they both heard it. He ducked out of the sitting room for a small moment before returning with a small child- no more than four years old, standing almost unnervingly calmly beside him. Pride and soft joy had written itself subtly, but clearly over the man's face. "Itachi, this is Minato. Start tea, please."

The young child ducked into a low bow before striding off into the kitchen. "Yes, father." Shukaku *watched* him as he left- seeing how smooth his movement already was, the depth of calm understanding that had already engraved itself into his face- the surety of his every action. The subtle distance between the Uchiha arrogance, and his own solemn… sorrow, or whatever else…

Minato and Fugaku talked about everything and nothing for a long few minutes before the Uchiha head gently excused himself to ‘check on his son,’ or, as the wry amusement floating through Minato’s mindscape indicated- fret over him. The subtle way that Minato relaxed as he left the room was all too obvious to the both of them. “ *Shukaku* …” hesitance, prodded with the faintest smidgen of his chakra. He could speak what he would- “ *you seem unusually attentive. You’d ignored the Uzumaki well enough.* ”

“ *Ah, I guess I am.”*

Another faint edge of hesitance- a small bit of *fear* , though why Shukaku couldn’t understand. “ *Does it have to do with the… Ootsutsuki legacy you mentioned earlier?* ”

Perceptive… he’d been called genius for a good reason, indeed. Shukaku was silent for a long moment, just… remembering. Today was a day for that, it seemed… “ *It was Itachi.* ” Those words, from the future to the past to the future again. “ *The tragedy of his life was a major inspiration to the Sage of Six Paths.* ” As Minato choked on nothing, Shukaku continued in a much smaller voice- “ *...our father.* ”

“ *Itachi. That little kid there- was an inspiration to the* Sage of Six Paths.” The sheer depth of incredulity resplendent in Minato’s voice was almost impossible to compute.

“ *His life was an unending sorrow, but at the end of all things, his last words to his brother were that he would always love him.* ” No matter what. His chakra shifted slightly, edging against Minato’s- and the man felt the sheer *history,* the depth of emotion that those words meant to him. “ *It will be different, now. The tragedy will never need to happen.* ”

Minato’s voice was an empty whisper, so quiet in the empty room- “ *What* tragedy?”

“ *Some years from now, Shimura Danzo orders Uchiha Itachi to kill the entirety of his clan in exchange for his brother’s life.* ” His voice

was a bit bitter, against the shifting wave of Minato's horror- " *I said we'll do great things, didn't I, Minato?* "

Horror settled to shock, shock settled to perfect determination- true resolve. " *I won't let it happen.* " The door creaked open, and that small boy- that tragedy to be and his father with the quirked lip of a slightly amused grin walked back inside, gently placing the tea on the table between them. " *Still, though- Itachi and the* Sage of Six Paths?"

Shukaku couldn't help but laugh.

In the end, the tea tasted very good indeed.

Fugaku was unwilling to commit after the first meeting, but Minato was determined- and both recognized Danzo wouldn't make a good Hokage. Not for the Uchiha, at least.

They both knew it was but a matter of time until the Uchiha supported Minato for Hokage.

The obstacle course in the training grounds was almost ridiculously easy for Minato, but he ran through it anyways, movements deftly timed such each post was dodged with only milliseconds to spare. A perfect execution of speed and precision, pushing himself just that little bit further-

A blast of smoke filled the entire training ground, echoing the sound of a gregarious shout. "Minato! My favorite brat- *ow* … that's gotta hurt, kid." Jiraiya hopped off his toad, gently pulling Minato up from where he'd run into one of the training posts. "You gotta keep on your toes! Never give up- always alert! Keep yourself ready-"

"Yes, *sensei* ." Minato looked like he wanted to wring the man's neck. "I wasn't surprised by your appearance, I was surprised by *you* . Weren't you supposed to be out mopping up on the Kiri front?"

The toad summoner rubbed at his hair sheepishly. “Well, yes…but, I heard my favorite brat’s running for Hokage, after all this time! I kept trying to convince you, but you never wanted to really *go* for the hat, you know?”

“Yes. I know.” There was a bit of a disbelieving note to his voice- “telling me that I- a *married man* - would get all the woman I could ever want if I was Hokage is certainly not the best way of convincing me, sensei. I… thought you didn’t actually care.” Shukaku chuckled gently in the back of his mind- that certainly explained some things.

Jiraiya crossed his arms with a huff of mock-annoyance. “Well I did! What caused you to change your mind, if you don’t mind telling me?”

“Um…” Minato paused, indecision warring with loyalty, visions of Itachi’s future echoing in his mind- “I’d rather-”

Shukaku sighed good naturedly. “ *He's your teacher- if you trust him, then* trust *him. Tell him to summon the toad contract, though* .”

Jiraiya glanced at Minato a bit oddly for the request, but flicked through the hand seals nonetheless, the large scroll appearing in a puff of smoke before them. “Well, brat, tell me what you needed the contract for. I sure hope you didn’t want *Kakashi* to sign- he likes his mutts too much… Rin, maybe? She’ll be a- ow!” He reached up gently with his hand, rubbing softly at where Minato had hit him.

“So. Um.” A deep breath, and Minato calmed himself, a perfect mask of professionality falling neatly over his features as he grabbed onto Jiraiya and the scroll, flashing them away to someplace mountainous and snowy. “I was made into the Ichibi jinchuuriki.”

For a long moment Jiraiya just… stared at him unblinkingly, dumb shock written over his features. “...you’re not lying. I mean, I didn’t think the Ichibi was *dead* , but… how the *hell* did that happen? Why didn’t you just hiraishin away from the sealing?”

Minato chuckled sheepishly. “You don’t know the half of it. Apparently, the *Ichibi* did the sealing- they’ve been teaching me fuuinjutsu, and by now I’m probably better than you-”

“Never!” Jiraiya gasped in mock horror- “I didn’t allow you to surpass me so fast, brat!”

“As I was *saying* , the Ichibi is responsible for the sealing.”

Jiraiya quirked an eyebrow- disbelieving, possibly- “And the contract?”

“I’m not entirely sure.” A light shrug- “The Ichibi asked me to summon it.”

Jiraiya immediately swept the scroll up into his hands, holding it tight to himself. “I’m not going to let it get destroyed, so don’t get any funny ideas, tanuki- it’s *important!* ”

“ *Tell him to open the scroll.* ” Shukaku directed a bit of attention to the snow falling around them- “ *perhaps in an area with a bit less inclement weather?* ” Nodding, Minato relayed the information before they flashed away to Jiraiya’s somewhat dingy house, sweeping sake bottles off a table to make space for the scroll. “ *See the first three names before your own ?*”

Jiraiya nodded as Minato relayed the information, finger trailing over two in blood, and one in something *else* - “yep! Always wondered who they were… Ootsutsuki Hagoromo, Ootsutsuki Asura, and Ootsutsuki Shukaku. Nice little family…”

Minato started at the last one, directing a bit of inquiry inwards, only to be met by a faint prompt to speak to Jiraiya in person. When he opened his mouth again, it was with the rumbling tones of a bijuu. “Ootsutsuki Hagoromo-” Jiraiya leapt away from the scroll, hands held in a simple seal the moment he heard the unnatural depth of his voice, but he restrained himself- “the Sage of Six Paths. Ootsutsuki Asura- his son, my younger brother- the founder of the Senju and

Uzumaki clans. Ootsutsuki Shukaku.” The wry grin on Minato’s face looked almost out of place- “myself.”

Jiraiya shook his head, darting forward to roll up the scroll. “No way. Nuh uh. Don’t believe it.” Shukaku opened Minato’s mouth to say something more, but flinched frozen as Jiraiya’s hand grasped onto his own. “We’re going to resolve this at the source- if you would-” A poof of smoke, the rush of chakra and the whirl of some ancient space-time technique, and then they were standing in the verdant lushness of Mount Myoboku. “I don’t believe a single word of that. We’re going to find the truth, by my word as the toad sage of-”

Minato coughed softly, clearly hiding a laugh. “Sensei. Everyone here is a toad sage of Mount Myoboku.” The laugh burbled out of him as Jiraiya slumped dramatically. “Come on. Let’s go talk to the honorable great toad sage…”

Fukasaku looked *older* as he calmly ushered them into the vast emptiness of Gamamaru’s sanctum, once slick goatee frizzy and white, faint lines of age twisted around his form. The staff he’d once wielded adroitly, he now used to support himself.

Gamamaru, on the other hand, looked almost exactly the same as he had before- wrinkly, old, and with that glint of impossible knowledge heavy in his eyes. “Ah, Jiraiya… who’s that, again?”

Fukasaku facepalmed as the two toad summoners glanced at each other with identical looks of bewildered annoyance. Shukaku just laughed at Fukasaku’s misfortune. “The pervert kid, you senile geezer.”

“Yes… that one. Why were you here again?”

“The Ichibi-”

Gamamaru nodded slowly, the slash of water *just* loud enough to cut off Jiraiya’s speech. “Little Shukaku? Good kid, him… taught him

senjutsu a long while back. The other one… Minato?" Gamamaru *looked* at him for a long while, silently judging- "good choice, Shukaku. You are as ever the fulcrum of fate. Be careful."

" *Of course I will* ." It was a whisper, for Minato only-

"Wait!" Jiraiya obviously wasn't computing the conversation. "You're telling me that *the Sage of Six Paths* actually signed the scroll- and the bijuu are… what, his lovechildren?"

"Hagoromo…" a slight smile stretched across the old toad's face. "Now there's a man I've not heard spoken of beyond the vaguest of legends in a long time. You could learn a lot of history from little Shukaku, if you were so wise as to ask." Minato looked thoughtful at that, while Jiraiya was too busy having a mental breakdown in the corner with Fukasaku to deal with everything.

" *It's been a long time since I learned here, but…* " he swirled his chakra through Minato's coils, pulling a bit of attention to him- *"convey to the geezer my thanks. A lot of things wouldn't have worked out but for his patient teachings.* "

As Minato did so, then laughed inwardly at Jiraiya's plight, Shukaku couldn't help but think things were going very well indeed.

Minato gets lore, the clans get a better option than Danzo, and kid Itachi makes an appearance.

Itachi dosn't get much attention in this fic, but just imagine how the older version of himself would react:

Minato: ...and then he told me you were an inspiration to the Sage of Six Paths.

Itachi: (incredulous, but in an unemotional Itachi way) I find that highly unlikely.

Kushina: Deal with it.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Namikaze Minato, wounded, hero of Konoha many times over, and hero of the elemental nations just this once, signed a name on a scroll, and led Konoha to peace.

There had never been a better application for Kage.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The summons came early morning, when the moon still hovered half-full in the night sky and the stars yet glimmered in their intricate patterns across the firmament. Early enough to wake Kushina, and then Minato had to use every bit of his legendary speed to save the messenger from a truly terrible fate.

Of course, given exactly who he was, he arrived at the Hokage tower first of the entire group- even *after* dealing with Kushina's insomniac insanity. Tobirama *looked* at him for a long while- just… slightly squinted eyes, faintly suspicious gaze, before glancing away, apparently uninterested.

So the seals held up. Had he not been so busy dampening in his chakra signature Shukaku would have sighed in exhausted relief- so far, they didn't need to worry about *him,* at least. Sensors were going to be the *bane* of his plan.

Almost thirty minutes later an exhausted Rin stumbled into the room, followed quickly by a perfectly presentable, glowering Kakashi. "Excellent." Tobirama was *old* . It was apparent in his voice, the faint lack of perfect seamlessness in the way he moved, the soft exhale of breath in lungs that would never again be as strong as they were in

his prime. “Now that you’re all here, you’re getting assigned. I cannot afford to keep two of Konoha’s best jonin in the village for so long, not with the war as it is.” He pushed two scrolls across the desk, one wrapped in complicated seals, the other clearly for Kakashi. “Kiri front, off the shores of lightning country, go. Report back when the objectives are complete. This is a joint mission between jonin Namikaze and team Hatake.”

Minato dropped into a low bow, sweeping up the scrolls. “Yes, Hokage-sama.” His students subtly shifted such that they were directly on either side of him- almost so smoothly as to be practiced, if Shukaku hadn't seen how unconsciously the movement was performed. “It won’t be long before we return with another mission success behind us.” A smile- a twist of chakra, that incredible piece of fuuinjutsu and intent called hiraishin, and they were standing on the top of a mountain peak somewhere in northern Kumo. “Alright, Kakashi, let's see your mission.”

Glowering at the scroll Minato tossed him as though it'd personally wronged him, the young jonin flicked it open with a smooth motion of his hand. “Rank A. Client: Yondaime Raikage A.” Kakashi blinked for a moment at that, before continuing- “find and destroy Kiri saboteurs in northeastern Kumo region with assigned guide. Interesting…”

“It’s an important mission, Kakashi. Don’t let your distaste of being assigned a foreign nin as a teammate damage our diplomacy with our allies.” Kakashi looked like he’d bitten a particularly sour lemon at the end of Minato’s small speech but he nodded quietly in acquiescence all the same. “Rin, any thoughts?”

“Um… excited? I’m a kinda… useless teammate, so having someone else to keep Kakashi safe will probably be good.” By Minato’s internal glower, that was obviously the wrong response.

Sighing, Shukaku twinged a bit of chakra through his coils before he could say anything. “*Calm down. Rin’s not useless, Minato- she likely has some trauma from being kidnapped and from the juinjutsu. Be delicate*.” The internal glower tripled at the mention of the

juinjutsu, but on the outside Minato just nodded, shooting the girl a reassuring smile. *“What about our own mission?*”

“ *Likely not for their eyes.* ” Sand swirled around the encryption seals as they leapt through the peaks to the assigned meeting point, quickly picking them apart. “ *I knew the codes, you know.* ”

Shukaku shrugged internally. “ *It’s good practice. Whoever made these seals definitely had some math background- you can see how they didn’t rely on the fact that there* was *a seal to defend the information, but instead actually encoded the seal’s deactivation phases.* ” The scroll rolled open, this time written in a more conventional code that Shukaku had no hope of deciphering himself.

“ *Rank S.* ” Simple enough, to *Minato* . Even Shukaku had done things *much* beyond the purview of S-rank danger before- in all honesty, he hadn’t expected the *Yellow Flash* to get anything *but* an S or high A rank mission. “ *Client: Yondaime Raikage A. Eliminate the northern Kiri fleet hiding in neutral Kumo waters completely, before they can reach Iwagakure with assistance from assigned Kumo jonin.*

“ *Well, at least it's interesting.* ”

Minato nodded, stopping briefly on a peak ahead of Kakashi to leave a hiraishin marker. “ *Without their northern fleet, and with the Kiri-Iwa alliance already on shaky legs, this could very well mean the end of the war.* ”

“ *It’s likely why they sent you in the first place* .” They’d crossed miles, already- even Rin, the team’s slowest member, was particularly fast as far as shinobi speed went, and none of them wanted to stay far from the village for long. Kumo needed *deniability* if they wanted to keep recovering as they were, so leaf nin were… not necessarily the best to have around.

Two hours into their run, two Kumo shinobi leapt from the mountains to run alongside them- one dark skinned and almost ridiculously

muscular, the other a girl not older than fourteen- Hatake and Rin leapt into subtly defensive stances, but Minato- and Shukaku- recognised the two on sight. “Yo! We’re here to help, no need to yelp! Fools, ya fool, gonna blow Kiri outta tha’ pool!” Compounded with an energetic fist-pump, it was really difficult *not* to recognise Killer B on sight. “Little Yugito’s gonna go with tiny one and two, and I’ma go with Yellow Flash- you!”

Within Minato, Shukaku grinned in faint excitement. “ *What luck-* ”

Minato groaned and shot the backs of his rapidly disappearing students a wistful glance before turning back to B with a demure smile. “*I fought with them earlier in the war… luck isn’t exactly what I’d say when it comes to fighting alongside B. He’s… energetic*.” B leapt forward to grab Minato in a hug, but missed as he flashed back to where he’d laid down a hiraishin mark but moments before. “Killer B- the fleet?”

“Yeah! We’re gonna mess them up- to death, and they’re gonna flee the ocean’s breadth! C’mon!” Gyuki’s chakra flared over B’s skin like a clock of bubbling flames and then they were running, the mountains speeding by beneath them far faster than they had with the kids. “They’re just past Turtle Island, cordin’ to Jiraiya-sama, lord bijuu and I gonna blast them with a bijuudama!”

“ *Bijuudama?* ”

Shukaku smirked softly. “ *I’ll let you see it when he makes one. If you ever find yourself with a bijuu as a true enemy, that’s what you’d probably get to the face* . *Turtle island, though… if we pass there, put a hiraishin mark on it. It could be essential to your training as a jinchuuriki* .”

B leapt off the cliffside with a whoop and twirl, skidding off a wave as they dashed out onto the tumult of the open ocean. They *did* pass turtle island, which was certainly convenient, and then they were out across the open ocean, stormy clouds roiling above them on the final approach to the fleet-

In the distance, an armada- massive shadows crashing on the roil of immense waves, thunder shaking the heavens above them. B and Minato stopped atop a nearby wave as it crested hundreds of feet in the air, watching with serious gazes the silent progress of a mutual enemy. “Minato, ya fool- stay back. Lord bijuu and I are gonna make those ships *crack* .”

Chakra swirled around him in furious power, coalescing together as the burning shroud of energy spilled outwards into Gyuki’s tentacles, skeleton pushing out and flesh wrapping around the B as he *crashed* down into the sea- the size of a small mountain and with a chakra presence to literally *flatten* the waves around them.

Minato could only stare in awe as a chakra swirled in the beast’s massive maw, Shukaku reciting in his mind with excited, solemn commentary- “ *eight parts yang* -” it seethed out of the air around them as the whole sky above them twisted in endless rotation. “ *Two parts yin* .” A ball formed before Gyuki’s face, so dense it shone in the stormlight, so massive it overshadowed the weak attacks flying from the fleet toward them. “ *And bite*- ” the orb shrunk, spinning faster and faster- then disappeared.

They stared, together, as Gyuki braced on the roiling waves- and *fired* . A brilliant wave of incandescent energy shot from his maw, obliterating the very sea before it as it reduced a good third of the fleet to nothing but ciders and rubble, to the wailing of damned men as the ocean claimed its sovereignty over them.

Then again.

Then, *again* .

“ *So that’s the true power of a bijuu* .” Minto looked at the wreckage in sorrowful determination as he unsealed a brace of his tri-pronged Kunai, readying himself. “ *It begged the question of how you were ever sealed in the first place…* ”

“ *We are not without our weaknesses* . *Sage mode?* ” He *felt* Minato's hesitation as he looked at the seething waves around them, utterly bereft of any place to stand. *“I’ll provide the natural chakra- and there’s a few tricks I might as well show you while you’re at it.* ” Gyuki’s chakra construct collapsed back into Killer B, only the tails remaining as he dashed forwards-

“ *Sure* .” Minato *threw* hundreds of his kunai in the moment he accepted, carefully balancing the natural chakra in his coils. Shukaku could see everything *sharpen* to him as he settled neatly into sage mode, watching- the shining descent of his kunai, a million glittering drops of rain… Everything snapped into place as he became one with nature. The waves weren’t random, as ever the wind blew, the ocean danced in pattern- as broken ships sunk, he sensed *all things* .

The kunai reached *just* the right angle of attack, and Minato-

Teleported.

Slashed.

Repeat- again and again in the briefest fraction of a second, dancing like over the waves and staining the red with blood of Kiri nin. They didn’t even have a chance to react- simply watch as they died with a whisper of air cut in two. As much as Killer B had destroyed the fleet, Minato *ended* it.

It felt like an eternity, in the total awareness of sage mode-

Thirty seconds passed, and almost a thousand Kiri nin were slain, only those who were fast enough to block the initial volley surviving. Those who dove deep to escape Minato’s rampage found themselves facing Killer B as he swam beneath the waters, propelled by Gyuki’s tentacles- against a bijuu, they didn’t have much luck when it came to surviving.

Minato dropped into a crouch atop one of the gently settling wrecks, sage mode enhanced senses scanning the crashing storm for the few elite jonin who'd survived his initial rampage. " *Those tricks… now the chaff's out of the way, it'd be a good time for whatever you were planning.* "

Shukaku smirked softly, directing his chakra to Minato's hands in an eminently recognizable pattern. " *Hope you don't mind that I preemptively stole your signature attack . Take the natural energy, and the wind element…* " a rasengan formed in his hands, swirling blue with furious chakra- then expanded, wind element gently included under the guidance of Shukaku's chakra.

" *Holy… this is my attack… from this fated future?* " A soft grin spread across his face as it screeched in furious power- " *I'm going to name it- wind release: heavenly defiance of the-* "

" *No. Not happening. It's called rasenshuriken.* " Shukaku ignored Minato's slight pout as he laughed himself off the ship in a chakra empowered leap, racing over the waves to the first collection of Kiri jonin who'd banded together on another small island of sinking ships- " *and you can thow it* ."

Minato's smile bloomed, spreading across his face almost manically. "This is the best thing ever! Wind release-" to to the Kiri shinobi's surprise, the jonin saw him coming. " *Rasenshuriken* ." Not that it did much good as the attack sailed through the air towards them, expanding so fast the entire ship was sliced to confetti and so much pulp.

" *It's not even the most powerful variant of rasengan I've made over the years* ." Shukaku smirked softly as he *felt* Minato's desire to know more- " *we can save those for dedicated training, though- go and destroy your enemies!* "

" *How bloodthirsty* ." Kunai whistled through the air, throw from far enough yet that their targets would even see them coming through the storm-

He flashed to each target, rasengan messily imploding in chests, rasenshuriken blasting aside those at further ranges, a god of death on the battlefield- “ *I’m not the one destroying an entire fleet, am I?* ”

Minato nodded as his rasengan decapitated another elite Kiri jonin. “ *Fair, I suppose* .”

A few hours later, and there was nothing left of the Kiri fleet but so much wreckage, blood and floating bodies drifting aimlessly through the water. They’d tried to sneak past Konoha’s careful eye and change the war in a single move, but they’d overreached- without a kage-level shinobi to defend against someone like Minato, they’d been sitting ducks-

They’d wagered on the fact that Kumo wouldn’t be willing to get their hands dirty and potentially get roped into the war again.

As Shukaku watched Killer B pull himself, soaking and exuberantly rapping, from the waves beside them, he smirked- they’d wagered wrong. “Fool, ya fool! That was amazing, totally sent Kiri running! Never gonna know what hit em’ right, your precision’s just perfect on this stormy night.” It was noon. “Didn’t know you had the one, but lord bijuu says he’s fun!”

Minato blinked, slightly shocked, and Shukaku sighed inwardly. “ *I suppose you did use enough of my chakra during the battle to form those rasenshuriken that a complete jinchuuriki wouldn’t have trouble sensing us.* ”

There really wasn’t a point in dying it. “It’s a recent development, but Shukaku and I get along well enough.”

B froze for a moment, then exploded into wide smiles, bouncing gestures and exuberant rap. “Lord bijuu’s super all happily, knowing someone else’s treating his family! Never hesitate to call, don’t need to take a fall- we jinchuuriki gotta stick together!”

It was *just* enough for the burly man to get close enough to wrap him in a hug- physical contact enough for Shukaku to drive a bit of his own chakra into the man's coils. " *Gyuki. Have you ever tried bringing him into the shared mindscape with you? It should be possible.* "

A gruff- exasperated but warm- voice responded in a gentle murmur. " *Kurama would try to kill him the moment he saw us… Matatabi's been trying with Yugito, but she's still too loyal to her village. They can't get along on some of the simplest things-* "

" *Still sees her as a tool, then?* "

A faint sense of distaste coursed over Gyuki's chakra. " *Yes. It's getting better. I could probably bring B into the shared mindscape, sometimes* -" faint acceptance from Shukaku, and the essence of a smile in return.

B waved once more, then nodded to the shore. "Take us to the students, ya fool? Making them wait would be cruel."

"Well, such is the life of a hiraishin user- transport nin extraordinaire." He chuckled, weary from the slaughter- still somewhat stunned from B's reveal, and flashed them away from the ocean in the space of an instant.

There had been no Kiri saboteurs, but on the bright side young Yugito had managed, after a few hours of ceaseless arguing with Kakashi about pointless things and 'detestable sharingan,' managed to get along fairly nicely with the team. Rin had taken somewhat of a shine to the jinchuuriki for her ninjutsu prowess, and had even won a small ninjutsu off of her- a homing fireball.

B swept in with all the tact and subtlety of a S-rank ninjutsu, sweeping Yugito into an embrace and almost getting gored for it. Minato had dropped down next to his students with… considerably more patience.

The four of them- including Shukaku- were sharing identical looks of distaste towards the two Kumo nin, and Kakashi was the one who voiced what they were all thinking. “Can we return to Konoha now, please? Sensei, I’m sure we need to get our reports done as soon as possible-”

“Fine-” and then they were standing in Tobirama’s office. Rin and Kakashi gave their report in person- more or less *we encountered no problems* , followed by *no, my ninken are not idiots,* and *yes, we did go through all the appropriate procedures for potential sabotage.*

The Hokage nodded slowly then, motioned toward the door- “Minato. Wait here please.” A subtle gesture- but a gesture he recognized nonetheless- sent the ANBU in the room out with them. “It’s been a long time, but I recognize that chakra signature.” His eyes were dark-serious. “It was, after all, the one that inspired my research into space-time seals. So…”

“Some days ago, after an incident with my team on a solo mission of theirs, the Ichibi was sealed into Rin along with a juinjutsu that would have it reseal itself into, presumably, me, Danzo-sama, or yourself at the soonest opportunity. I can only presume they did not consider my mastery of sealing during the decision-making process.”

Tobirama’s gaze was calculating. “And you want to be Hokage…”

“Respectfully, Hokage-sama, as this recent mission has demonstrated, my current condition does not in any way affect my performance as a ninja of Konoha.” It enhanced it considerably, actually, but with Tobirama’s distrust of the Uchiha on the line, it might not be seen that way. “I think that I would make a truly good Hokage candidate.”

“It’s possible.” Tobirama, sighed, a soft thing- “I remember Mito… she was a feisty one. I’m not so old as to believe that Danzo is the only good candidate for the damned hat. He has a vast wealth of experience when it comes to leadership, but you have a particular brand of charisma that could be more beneficial to Konoha come the

end of war.” He accepted the sealed scroll from Minato’s hands- the mission, along with a report written by Shukaku of the general actions they took. “You’ve proved you can do well in war. Now, prove to me you can do well in peace.”

A scroll rolled across the table to Minato, bound in even tighter seals than the last. “A…” sand drifted up from his pocket, neatly unpicking the seals beneath Tobirama’s watchful eye. “A diplomatic mission. To meet with the Yondaime Mizukage and secure a peace treaty. Are you sure I’m the best one to send for this?”

“With Tsunade out of the village… yes.” His gaze was weary, but still so sharp with the vicious intelligence that had made him famous all those years ago- “show me your will of fire, Minato. Show me if you can fulfill my brother’s dreams… and then maybe I’ll think of your desire for the position again.”

It sounded like a condemnation.

“It’s an impossible task. Kiri isn’t ready for peace. ” Nevertheless, he picked up the scroll anyways, tucking it neatly into his flack jacket. “By your leave, Hokage-sama-” and then he was gone, pulled away through space-time to his bedroom.

Difficult, indeed.

Later than night, after Minato had took Kushina and his students out to eat at Ichiraku’s- and after the couple had reacquainted at home, Shukaku clawed his hands into the tangling swirl of Minato’s chakra and *pulled* , past his mind of drifting clouds, down- to the infinite stone blankness of the shared mindscape.

“Ya fools! Killer B was waiting for forever, here, with lord Bijuu!” Minato blinked into full wakefulness in a moment, eying the vast expanse around him- and then Killer B himself- with a wary confusion. “He kept telling me about a mindscape, and a dream, but

things never are as they seem! Seems you've got Shukaku here too!"

When Minato responded, it was with dryness to rival the sandy head he was sitting on. "Where *are* we? I was going to *sleep* ."

It was Gyuki who responded, his voice the same rumbling depth that Shukaku had heard all those years ago, and again through their long exile- "The shared mindscape of the bijuu. As we were once all the same entity before our father-" Minato's eyes widened slightly, as B tilted his head quizzically at the bijuu- "split us into our current selves, we retain a connection beyond the physical. As you two are connected to *us* , through a particular expression of will, we are able to bring you here as well."

"To talk," rumbled Shukaku- "even continents and countries apart, nothing can prevent two perfect jinchuuriki from talking to each other than tightening the seals. B, we were recently assigned a diplomatic mission to Kiri-" he ignored Minato's mortification about sharing *confidential details,* and B's energetic promises to help- "and I was thinking…"

In the end, it was a productive meeting- informative.

For the two Bijuu, who hadn't seen each other truly in a long while- it was a reminder of *family* .

For peace-

The first hints of sunrise's pale peach blush across the horizon were Minato's last alarm- a faint kiss across a still barely awake brow, her adamantine chain brushing through his air in gentle response- and then he flashed away.

Kumogakure's sunrise was just as breathtakingly magnificent as Konoha's, in a different way- vast shadows stretching into the spiny

mountain range, color dancing on the edges of mountain peaks in scintillating halos of solar promise.

Two figures stood beside the stone pillar they'd appeared on, one cusped neatly in the grip of the other. *Strong* was the best description Shukaku had for the Yondaime Raikage- he'd not seen any of his predecessors bar the first, but *that* man had been much less… physically capable than the human before him. "Namikaze. Tobirama assigned you as the Konoha ambassador to Kiri?"

Minato bobbed his head, gently holding out the scroll they'd been given to the man, who snatched it in an instant, barely skimming over the contents before throwing it to B. "We'd be honored to have a representative from Kumogakure in diplomatic negotiations."

A snorted softly, carefully repositioning his headlock as B tried to escape. "Tobirama really didn't know what he was getting when he appointed you ambassador, did he? We barely fought the latter half of the war-"

"Most Konoha shinobi understand the position of weakness you were momentarily placed in after the defeat of your Sandime, but we *are* allies, and we'd appreciate if you lent your support during peace negotiations with the land of water."

"Yeah, ya fool! Let me go and beat up the suckers in negotiation, gonna be Kumo's salvation-" A sighed, running a hand down his face as he sent Minato a long-wearied glance- "not gonna let us go after we got their fleet, let me go with him to the meet!"

"Absolutely not. B, you're the *jinchuuriki* , and are too valuable of an asset to risk in such delicate negotiations." Went unsaid was just how easily the man would be able to thoroughly insult every diplomat they'd meet. A jonin leapt from the rocks behind them, dropping neatly to the ground beside A. "Daiki will represent Kumo in these negotiations. He will defer to you." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Do not betray this trust. B-" the jinchuuriki perked up a bit- " *go. Home.* "

Slumped. Faintly, across the shared mindscape, Shukaku heard Gyuki's laughter.

Minato gave one more demure smile to the Raikage before snapping the scroll neatly out of B's hand, brushing a finger across Daiki's wrist-

Jumping, space contorting as they were in *Kumogakure* - and then they were in the land of water, mists spread in suffusing silence around them. "Come. We'll meet at the daimyo's palace. Kiri almost certainly has shinobi there who can relay a message to the Mizukage…" they leapt off into the mists, and to peace.

The negotiations, for all they'd started small, had rapidly bloomed into the most important event in world politics. First it had been an elite jonin from Kiri, then their jonin commander. B had managed to show up- or, as it was, run away from home- and A himself followed soon after, which had instantly required the presence of the Mizukage himself. Onoki had- eventually- shown up in that particular flashy way of his- that was to say, flight- and eventually, even Rasa had sent a diplomat.

Nonetheless, as the month passed by, tensions were high between the various powerful shinobi who'd made their way to an unmoderated event in what was, essentially, an active warzone. Nobody so much as *breathed* wrong, but the tension was there.

A treaty was *almost* there. A true, general ceasefire.

The end of the war was in sight.

As the sun rose, Minato carefully inked the last lines on the agreement between Iwagakure and Konoha, gently passing the scroll back to a glowering Onoki. "The terms of reconciliation should be favorable. Tobirama has long just wanted this ceaseless war to *end* ."

“At least one of you younglings has *tact* . I’ll get back to you by-” he froze, frowning- then summoned a cone of brilliant chakra as the faint noise of a fight eliminated through the daimyo’s palace. “Intruders.” The word was hissed with a furious scowl as he carved through one of the walls, flying through the hole towards the main chamber.

“Tsuchikage-sama. The hiraishin would allow us to reach there faster-”

Onoki paused for a moment, and that was all he needed to *require* the extra speed. “ *Fine* . Just the cloth though- no funny juinjutsu business, hear me? I’m not having another because one of Konoha’s jonin got all touchy-feely with me, hear?”

Minato suppressed a snort of laughter as he placed a hand on the trailing edge of Onoki’s robe. “I’m a married man, Tsuchikage-sama-” then they were *there* , standing neatly atop the table in a small circle of *annihilation* , thrown weapons breaking to so much *nothing* as they met Onoki’s shield. “Unknown ANBU attack! Stay with the other Kage, I’ll defend.”

“Brat, you’re practically a Kage yourself. Let the bodyguards-”

“Didn’t bring one!” Minato leapt off the table in a blur of speed, sage mode manifesting in a gentle discoloration of the eyes and face as Shukaku fed him chakra. Two rasengan formed neatly in his hands, seething with wind energy as he threw it at the masked men. “ *Strong fire affinities… no obvious clan or village affiliations. We know that its likely not Iwagakure based on their reactions, and Kiri is unlikely because of the affinities…* ”

Shukaku gently shaped the wind release: rasenshuriken together, blooming spheres of molecular annihilation cutting down the invading ANBU. “ *It’s almost certainly not Kumo, either. A wouldn’t do anything that could put his brother in mortal peril.”*

Minato frowned, grim- “ *So Suna*- ”

“ *Or Konoha.* ” Minato’s chakra spiked in instant denial- “ *Danzo has motive. This meeting was supposed to be an impossible overture for peace, and it’s turned into the next best thing to a five kage summit. I’m not sure how much my interference has changed… but I’d bet he sees this as the hat slipping out of his grasp.* ”

“ *Possible, then* .” He didn’t sound like he liked it, though. Each time he stepped forward, dancing through the combat in a series of fast shunshin, he left behind a hiraishin mark- and each time he left behind a mark, he only became more deadly. B leapt beside him for a moment, high-fiving with a visceral roll of chakra beneath his hands- a simple chakra sharing ninshu, but one well appreciated.

Even the simple gesture sent Minato’s spirits soaring. It was nice- to work with allies. To work for *peace* - such was the dream. A brief minute passed before he flashed back to the table, blood splattered over his otherwise pristine formalwear. “Threats neutralized.”

“Hm. There’s a *reason* I didn’t want B here-”

B landed atop the table in the breadth of a moment, crashing between the accusatory glares “Fools, ya fool! Lord bijuu says there still groups to deal, else we’re gonna be an enemy meal!” There- at the edge of sage mode-

Shukaku eyes widened as he recognised the first seal he’d ever made, repeated a *hundred thousand times over* -

Minato shouted something incoherent as a torrent of sand blasted out of his form, wrapping around the room to the shocked exclamations of the Kage, fuuinjutsu characters layering themselves across the walls-

Daiki! He was still-

Moving .

In the breadth of a second Shukaku wrote the most complicated space-time seals any of the Kage had ever seen across the walls of the main chamber. In the same instant, Minato flashed throughout the entire palce, throwing every shinobi, every *person* into the room with his hiraishin-

The seal shimmered golden and blue, and the entire summit vanished to Suna-

The entire palace exploded.

Minato returned to wakefulness beneath the burning wind country sun, chakra seething beneath his skin and the somewhat rough ministrations of *A* and *Onoki* . Shukaku found Onoki's simple accelerated healing jutsu was expected- A's rather in depth bone and muscular regeneration *much* less so.

His jinchuuriki was more surprised that they were even bothering with healing himself in the first place. "Ah… hello. A-sama. Sorry about putting… your brother in such danger." The man scowled, but the last vestiges of sage mode sensed a faint… admiration to the gesture? Not possible.

Shukaku just laughed at him. " *Minato. You saved* every single person *in the water daimyo's palace. Due entirely to your- well, our, but that's immaterial- efforts, there was not a single allied casualty in the assault- aside from yourself.* "

"Huh… that's interesting." It was only Onoki's look- the sort of one that asked *are you insane* - that made him realize he'd spoken outside. "So… peace?"

A's laugh, Onoki's smile- both were sharp, bitter-

Sage mode told them it was hopeful.

Peace…

The third great shinobi war ended with the four Kage treaty, in which- somewhat ironically, the most famous signatory was the only one *not* to wear a hat.

Namikaze Minato, wounded, hero of Konoha many times over, and hero of the elemental nations just this once, signed a name on a scroll, and led Konoha to peace.

There had never been a better application for Kage.

They're going places... man, writing this story makes me tired :L

Shukaku: I do so wonder who would send ambiguous, masked ANBU to attack a major political meeting for seemingly no benefit whatsoever. Huh, I guess we'll never know...

Convalescence

Chapter 22: Convalescence

“So… you came for Minato’s fate. Is that a bijuu thing?”

“No.” He pulled out a packet of ramen noodles, and dumped the whole thing into boiling water. With salt- and soy sauce, and all the other stuff too… “This situation is actually rather unique; I foresaw tragedy, and decided to change it.”

“Out of the goodness of your heart?”

No, not exactly- “somewhat,” he allowed. He’d had self preservation in mind from the start, but this group of people, this generation… “your stories interested me.” It wasn’t even a lie. Lives ago, when he’d been a boy before a screen… “Minato is my chosen- there are threats out there that being contained within a jinchuuriki will help with. I chose the strongest shinobi in the world, then amplified that. I’m not going to allow such a terrible fate to pass.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The first assassin was remarkably subtle.

Minato had flashed back directly to the hospital after the Kage summit, treaty in hand, legs still broken. Twenty two hours of intensive surgery realigned the fifty seven shattered pieces of bone, and extensive medical treatment kept him bound to bed. The doctors said it would be six months until he recovered completely, if he did at all- Shukaku guessed, between the number of favors Kushina had pulled with the Uzumaki, and his own chakra, it wouldn’t take more than three weeks.

Poison in the intravenous drip- that was the first attempt to kill Minato. It failed, of course- his chakra burned through the weak toxin so quickly Minato barely noticed it was there in the first place. The second, a brace of senborn that clattered to the ground after being thrown through the mysteriously open window, was a bit *less* subtle.

The kunai and explosive tag put the whole hospital on alert. Kushina had yelled at the Hokage for *hours* , and at the end of it all they'd gotten permission to move Minato back to his own apartment with Kushina.

The next assassination attempt was almost beautiful in its elegant complexity- the infiltrator had replaced several grains of rice in Minato's pantry with special grains inscribed with storage seals- when his stomach acid broke them down, the resulting metal and toxins would be almost immediately fatal. Unfortunately for the ROOT assassin's plans, Shukaku was a seal *master* , and the basic storage seals were so far from being able to escape his attention the attempt was almost laughable.

Rin visited a few times, at the start- a completely trustworthy medic to check over Minato's condition. After only a week, she moved into the apartment, and with *her* moving in, Kushina had gone to grab Kakashi.

That… that was the highlight of Shukaku's week so far.

Something crashed in the kitchen, a clamor of falling metal and *something* shattering, coupled with the ominous sound of rattling chains. "...absolutely not. I have my *own apartment,* Kushina!" The sound of chains multiplied, spilling through the entire house in Kushina's own peculiar way of saying *no*-

"Kashi! Stay right there-" a muffled shout, and the clash of adamantine chains bashing against themselves as they encased a victim- "Minato's been worried about you- ya know? With him not

bringing you out to team practice, and stuff- he must have thought you'd spiraled into ninken depression again!"

"That's not a *thing*, Kushina." Rin's giggling from the bedside beside them told Shukaku it very much was- "I'm just saying, I don't need to be here. Minato is a strong shinobi-"

Kushina's scoff, audible through the entire house, made Minato blush furious red beneath Rin's gentle healing jutsu. "Yeah, and so are you until you use your sharingan for like- *four seconds* , ya know? Just saying, he'll be happy to know you're not killing yourself with the training and like… stuff. That would be bad." Shuaku could *hear* the sagely nod at the end of that.

"...fine. But I'm *visiting,* Kushina-" the door to the bedroom slammed open, revealing Rin tending to Minato's wounds with expert medical jutsu, and the array of scorch marks scattered across the wall. "What *happened* in this room?"

For all it was weak, Minato's grin was a point of brightness against Kakashi's gloom. "Multiple assassination attempts-" well, the brightness was all but gone beneath the *blazing* killing intent Kakashi was exuding. "We're fine."

"See, Kushina! He's *fine* . He managed to guard against assassins despite being literally immobile. Can I go now?"

"Yep!" Kakashi made to shunshin away, only to be grabbed by Kushina's chain and a devilish grin. "To your *home* , to *rest* . You *better* do *only* that, cause' if Minato says one of his hiraishin tags are on stupid jonin knocking themselves out from chakra exhaustion *again* , then *this jonin* will have to come and teach her little minion a lesson, huh?"

Kakashi shivered a bit, before huffing and walking over to sulk in a corner with baleful glare toward everything except- sometimes- Rin's rather paltry attempts at Yugito's fire jutsu. When Minato finally got around to asking, the answer for *why* he'd stayed was as simple as it

was an obvious deflection. Something about being able to do nothing *here* just as well as he could do nothing at home.

The way his eyes scanned the room though- the way he fell into a silent protection detail as Kushina loudly made the place a *home,* as Rin healed…

As much as the others, he was *worried* -

As much as the others, he was part of their little family-

The fourth assassination attempt was by and far the worst one- had it not been for his own presence and the shinobi's clear orders to *not* kill Kushina, they might have even succeeded- or, at least, killed Rin and Kakashi. Almost twenty jonin level ANBU in a careful assault pattern just after midnight, a hole through the roof to exploit a weak part in the seals-

Shukaku noticed them first, exploding out of Minato in a vicious swirl of sand and immense chakra, coalescing *humanity* out of nothing as the first root nin stabbed down with a slender kunai. Flickering barrier seals flashed in infinite permutations between himself and the blow as his flesh knitted together in shifting sand, robes settling on his form- twin horns on his head, and then a *rasengan* smote through the nin's head in a spray of gore and shrill screeching. "I'm sorry. For this-" his voice rumbled through the house as his *killing intent,* the sheer majesty of its breadth, expansive and *ancient* - crashed down on the house. "I cannot suffer you to live."

Somewhere, rooms over, the house screeched with the sound of a thousand chirping birds, rattling chains and the sound of burning bodies as self-destruct seals triggered. Shukaku had no time for that, though- sand spilled through the house in shifting seals, barriers painting themselves in resolute inviolability as he strode imperiously through the halls.

The next root nin to face him died to a rasengan- the third to a failure to understand that *bijuu* simply did not equate with damaging tenketsu or striking weak points. Blood cascaded off his robe as he struck, again and again through the shinobi who *thought* they could sneak past his barriers- rasengan slamming through flesh and blood with the sickening sound of cracking bones and organs grinding to paste.

They *dared*- and they would die.

Chains exploded out of the wall in front of him, golden light slamming two root shinobi through the wall before they ripped apart the floor beneath them- Shukaku dove after them into a room on fire, a single root jonin locked in a deadly struggle with Rin.

Fire cascaded from her fingers, running along the walls and *pulling* toward the masked shinobi as Rin held a seal, *killing intent* - weak, but there- pouring off her as she delicately danced away from his blades. The chains made quick work of him, stabbing through his shoulders just long enough for Shukaku to drive a rasengan through his chest.

Trembling, Rin released the fire jutsu. “Sensei! You’re-” her expression froze as she noticed the short horns, the silhouette of a cloak and the dark of his hair. “You’re not sensei.” The fire changed course from where it’d been burning the root nin, racing towards him-

“Stand still.” Even here his voice was deep with the echoes of impossible undertones as he stepped closer, flaring his cloak around them both. “I don’t intend to hurt you Rin. I’m here to protect Minato.” Seals spilled out from beneath his feet, and with a distinct sense of *pressure* - just for a moment, the fires that had been blazing merrily at the wood walls and cloth hangings puttered out. “I’m glad you’re safe-”

Rin backed away in horror, eyes wide. “You’re *it.* The- the-”

“Ichibi, yes.” He sighed, leaping neatly out of the burning room to the floor above. “Kakashi is still in danger, but keep in mind, I *really* don’t intend to hurt any of you. I rather *like* Minato.” Well, he’d been prepared to like him for *centuries* , but it was nice not to be let down.

Rin nodded, something bitter passing over her face for a moment before she nodded, slumping in exhaustion. “Just don’t the bastard hurt himself, please?”

“Of course-”

Beside him Kushina choked on air as she stabbed through one of the root shinobi guarding Kakashi’s room, eyes wide as she *stared* . “Kami! What did you have to be so *hot* ?”

Somewhere below, Shukaku was sure Rin was blushing furiously. “It’s a henge, Kushina. I *literally am* my clothes- everything’s just a bundle of sand.”

The kunoichi kicked down the door, decapitating the last root nin with a vicious swing of her chains. “Huh… sounds warm. And cuddly…” The entire chamber had been transformed into an eldritch horror-scape of branching lightning and the burning stench of blood and flesh, echoing the fissures indented deeply into the walls. In the center of it all Kakashi stood, drenched in blood with the remnants of lightning crackling around his hand, sharingan eye swirling in maddening patterns of inevitable exhaustion. “Kashi! Boy, am I glad you're alright-”

“You were right, Kushina.” The woman perked up for a moment- “You’re in so much danger that I can’t let the lack of competence in this household put a risk to Minato-” his eye hardened as he *saw* him, swirling in that exact bloody shade of red, the shade of nightmares. “Why is there an unknown shinobi here? No-” Shukaku could almost see his mind dredging through pages upon pages of memorized information- “Unknown Sunaarashi Survivor. Rank A. Missing nin from Iwagakure. You have once chance to explain yourself-”

“Not missing- technically, I never joined the hidden villages when they formed.” The depth of his voice- and the absurdity of the statement- was enough to stop Kakashi’s inquisition short. “I’m…”

“He’s trustworthy, ya know! You can tell him, Ichi-”

“My name is Shukaku.” Kushina looked startled, but nodded all the same. He supposed it’d make sense, with her knowing *Kurama’s* name. Kakashi looked at him with a furrowed brow, as if trying to piece together the parts of some grand puzzle- “you would know me better as the Ichibi.”

An instant denial settled across the young jonin’s face. “The Ichibi is a mountain-sized tanuki demon, not an A rank missing nin with a bounty from Iwa and nowhere else. I don’t believe you.”

“Minato is my jinchuuriki, as of now. I’m sure you understand the importance of *discretion* with this information?” Kakashi nodded jerkily, still glaring at him with disbelief clearly written across his eyes, and Shukaku couldn’t help but gently sign. “It’s a *ninjutsu* . I’m under a henge, Kakashi, it’s not that hard to understand the concept of changing forms.”

“Fine.” He glanced at Kushina- who, for fairly obvious reasons, believed everything Shukaku had said- “I’ll give you… provisional belief. Provisionally.” His lips twisted into a grimace, and Shukaku was sure Kushina was hiding laughter of *some* sort. “Is sensei safe?”

Shukaku nodded. “I put him behind enough barriers to tank a bijuudama. I highly doubt that he *isn’t* safe.” Rin joined them in the sundered room, glancing at Shukaku with a depth of emotion- but she said nothing, and perhaps that was enough. His sand shifted easily to his control, seals picked apart at the seams as they walked back through the few feet to Minato’s room.

He’d woken up from the commotion, and had already unsealed the two innermost barriers, only pausing as he saw the others step into his room. “Shukaku? But… how are you-” he gestured somewhat

intently to his chest, the two kids looking on in confusion, Kushina glancing away with a blush. “I thought bijuu couldn’t…”

Shukaku nodded solemnly. “Under normal circumstances, yes. In Rin’s case, I didn’t incorporate fully into her coils- most of my chakra was in dedicated storage seals on her skin.” Kakashi jerked slightly at that, glaring at his back with impressive killing intent- “In your case, I only unsealed a small portion of myself- roughly five percent, putting me at elite jonin chakra levels.”

“Good.” Minato sighed, dropping back onto his bed with relief. “I was rather worried I’d have to die, now.”

Kushina cracked her knuckles *threateningly* . “Yeah, that’d be a real shame, you sissy. After everything we did to keep you alive, you just go and die on us? *Not likely,* you *pansy*- ” Kakashi, Rin, and Shukaku shared a look before unanimously agreeing that *not* inside of the room was the best place to be right now.

The kitchen had been mostly spared from the attack, out of the way as it was. Kakashi slumped bonelessly into one of the chairs, echoes of exhaustion draping themselves off his form as the last dregs of adrenaline fled his system. “I have *questions* . Firstly- *why* .”

Rin had also slumped into one of the chairs leaving *Shukaku* to make food. Sure. It would be *fine* . It’d been over a thousand years since he’d last cooked for anyone, and he’d never been the best chef even in his past life… “Minato is destined for great things. Kakashi, had I not intervened, Rin would have cast herself to her death on your hands to save Konoha. Kushina and Minato would die.” He could see the minute flinch in the boy’s posture at the thought, and the brief flicker of killing intent from Rin.

“So… you came for Minato’s *fate* . Is that a bijuu thing?”

“No.” He pulled out a packet of ramen noodles, and dumped the whole thing into boiling water. With salt- and soy sauce, and all the

other stuff too… “This situation is actually rather unique; I foresaw tragedy, and decided to change it.”

“Out of the goodness of your heart?”

No, not exactly- “somewhat,” he allowed. He’d had self preservation in mind from the start, but *this* group of people, this generation… “your stories interested me.” It wasn’t even a lie. Lives ago, when he’d been a boy before a screen… “Minato is my chosen- there are threats out there that being contained within a jinchuuriki will help with. I chose the strongest shinobi in the world, then *amplified* that. I’m not going to allow such a terrible fate to pass.”

Carefully, he ladeled the ramen into two bowls, setting them on the table. Kakashi gave him an odd look before he tucked in, and Rin scrunched up her face a bit at the sight of it. “Respectfully, Shukaku-sama- this is *awful* . If you want to cook, then you should at least know *how* .”

“Not my fault I haven’t needed to eat for a millenia.”

“I…” Rin’s voice was soft- hesitant. For all her strength of will, only Kakashi’s glare prompted her to complete the sentence. “I… could teach you, if you want?” She’d shifted pitch steadily higher by the end of the sentence, falling silent with an embarrassed blush.

Shukaku was silent for a long moment… it would be good. Memories of a different girl, so similar- a daughter… Okimi would have been proud. “I’d be honored, Rin.”

Kakashi’s *glower* made it all worth it.

Over the next two weeks, Rin had made it her personal mission to make Shukaku as useful in his human form as possible. All the little things he’d forgotten over the years- cleaning, sleeping in a bed without setting it on fire with Kokuo, *cooking* - he still hated food- were pounded into his head with almost admirable determination.

It was a unique form of torture, but he supposed Rin had to get back at him for the trauma of their first meeting *somehow.*

Kakashi- almost hesitantly- included himself in his lessons, teaching him the fundamentals of combat in human form. Stances, such that he couldn't be pushed over by an errant blow, yet still light enough on his feet to dodge a barrage of kunai. Sweeping blows for his katana, paired with simple throwing techniques for his glass kunai- slowly, they built up the basics.

As the days passed and Minato slowly recuperated enough to stand with the aid of crutches, the assassination attempts grew in desperation. None of them were as direct as the root ANBU raid, but they were all devious, subtle, and *extremely* deadly. With the amount of Shukaku's seals blanketing the apartment, towards the end of the two weeks it resembled nothing so much as a veritable *fortress* . Kakashi distanced himself from everyone, just a bit-

Toward the end of the two weeks, it was fairly obvious to everyone he wanted *out* of the apartment, and away from everyone either with red, blonde, or Rin-colored hair.

Two days later, he disappeared into the night with not a word-

Just as Minato had started to actually *move* with the crutches, Kushina and Shukaku read the message etched into the back of the door, the chakra resonating within the kanji ever so faintly disrupting the wards.

"No more." Shukaku's voice was a whisper as he traced the jagged lines. "Danzo will not cease until he is given a reason to cease." Kushina's eyes widened in horror- "I will not let this continue. Wait for me. I will return with evidence of Shimura's crimes. I will not let Obito's sacrifice be in vain."

Kushina shook her head, hair raising in faint anger. "Nuh uh… that-that- *idiot!* C'mon, Shuku!" She kicked the door open, dragging him out onto the lonely emptiness of the streets at night.

Time to save a fool.

Poor Danzo. He was so close to being hokage, only for a better option to step up immidiatly. Now he must, with great wit, foresight, and excessive use of emotionally stunted assassins, eliminate the competition and reclaim his rightful title as Hokage of the hidden leaf. Don't you just feel for him :O

Proffesional Fool Saving

Chapter 23: Proffesional Fool Saving

“That rat bastard, running off on us, ya know? He better be ready for a super, extra hard training session after this.” Her expression morphed into one of hesitance, almost horror- “with no ramen. For at least a week.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Kushina leapt across the rooftops of Konoha at night, cold calm settled onto her form. It was almost unnerving, the shift to the *mission* - a shinobi mindset indeed… Well, she was still muttering profanities about *stupid, emotionally stunted* children, just… quietly.

Following behind her would have been difficult had it not been for his practiced Shunshin, shifting neatly from rooftop to rooftop in a blur of motion as they approached the Hokage monument. “Minato says Kakashi’s hiraishin marker is somewhere around here.”

“That *rat bastard* , running off on us, ya know? He better be ready for a super, extra hard training session after this.” Her expression morphed into one of hesitance, almost *horror* - “with *no ramen.* For at least a week.” They arrived silently beneath the impassive stone faces of the Hokage, shadows of stone staring down across the expanse of Konohagakure. “It’s really useful that you can talk to the sissy, ya know?” She sighed dreamily. “I’d give a lot to always have that connection…”

“Treating Kurama a bit better is always an option.”

“No way!” She shook her head, shoulders set in that particular way of hers that denoted *argument* really meant *get whacked by chains,*

idiot . “Grumpy fluff ball isn’t gonna get nothing from me, believe it!”

“I… hm. Fine, just consider your options.” Had it not been for balancing relations with Minato… well Kurama could wait. He had for a long while before, and could for a bit longer. They flickered through the cracks in the rock, shadows hiding them from sight as they shimmied up the side of the Hokage monument and into the shadows beneath the Sandaime’s nose. “The root base… should be here.” He cast his senses out, and- yes… seals. Layers on layers of particularly fine work. Uzumaki, at the very least. It almost reminded him of the Sunaarashi style.

Kushina nodded resolutely, summoning her chains to *bash* the door down for a mere moment before Shukaku held up a hand to forestall her. “ *C’mon* , tanuki-bastard- we gotta *save Kashi* …”

“We also can’t allow recognizable damage to anywhere that isn’t a secret anyways.” He pressed his hand into the rock behind them, pulling on the same *twist* , echoing infinites of air as rock crumbled to dust, and silicon shifted away from impurities. Seals etched themselves onto the blank slates- simple adhesive barriers, a barrier that matched the texture but acted as a one-way filter for toxins, a similar one for the eyes.

Two faces- two completely blank masks, brand new. A single symbol was etched perfectly into the center-

The sun and moon of the Ootsutsuki clan, etched in simple white. Heritage, for the both of them. Kushina grasped it reverently in her hand, fixing it neatly to her face. “This is so *cool!* Believe it! Now *I* get to be one of the funny mask men!” She leaned in closely to Shukaku as he picked through the seals over the entrance. “We need a name… uh- the masked bandits! No, we’re not bandits… the ANBU two? Not that… the fire twins!”

“I don’t have fire release.” The last set of seals slipped neatly over the entrance, dispelling an genjutsu while simultaneously pulling

open a set of blast doors. “Frankly, I also don’t see how Kakashi could have gotten in here by himself-”

“Unless he got himself captured! That *idiot!* No ramen for a *year* !” As if that was a threat- “And no eggplant either!” Shukaku couldn’t help but smirk beneath the mask as they carefully flickered deeper into the building, Shukaku leaving behind Minato’s hiraishin marks as he could. To his immense frustration, he’d been unable to perfectly capture the specific mix of intent and *vision* that Minato used- and as such, the hiraishin was momentarily not something *he* could perform.

It had earned its name as an impossible technique well enough, he supposed. Kushina signed something at him before stopping before a massive intersection, pipework crawling across the vast depths that yawed below them. Unfortunately for her, Shukaku couldn’t *understand* Konoha sign, which meant… pantomime.

At the very least *Shukaku* was able to write out his responses in his sand. Eventually they settled on a plan- Kushina would stand lookout while Shukaku rigged the entire base with his seals… and well, if that wasn’t an invitation to go wild, then Shukaku didn’t know what was.

Beneath the metal clad over the walls, wind *ground* against the solid presence of earth- and then, as the two elements mixed together, there was *sand* . It burst out of the seams between the metal, through the little patches of rust that had drawn ugly lines down the steel’s side-

The walls came alive, and Shukaku drew arrays of fuuinjustu, a thousand possibilities ready for an instant’s activation… a masterwork, as great as it’d ever been-

“ *Shukaku. Kakashi’s close to you. He’s channeling chakra through his hiraishin mark-* ” which meant trouble. The tanuki gestured frantically to Kushina before plastering the last few seals onto the walls, jumping down to the floor and sprinting past a single more

chamber. He could almost *see* the marker overlaid against his senses…

Kushina blasted down the door, as always, and this time it was a comfort to see Danzo and *Orochimaru* react with just as much startled shock as Shukaku had the first time she'd barged into the apartment. "Freeze, ya know! I'm not gonna let you do whatever dastardly and evil, and totally cruel thing you were about to pull off!"

Eyes widening in startled anger Danzo jerked the brand in his hand down toward Kakashi's tongue-

Not happening . Chakra swelled through the seals he'd written across the base, and every single piece of metal within a six-foot radius of Kakashi *vanished* - reduced to nothing but molleculary fine dust. "Danzo Shimura." He let his killing intent unfold- and for all that they had first focused on Kushina's appearance, the menacing growl of his voice- the utter certainty of death that *crushed* down on the Hokage monument- tore their attention to him. "You have committed a grave crime, traitor. Kakashi, *leave* ."

It spoke to his mental state that the suddenly freed shinobi didn't try to join the promised fight. In the mere moments they'd been speaking a storm of chains had rattled into the air, hovering menacingly- a halo of death, framed with the Kyuubi's leaking killing intent. Shukaku thought it was likely Danzo had never faced such a strong desire to *see him dead* .

The killing intent of a bijuu was a weapon in and of itself. Orochimaru almost looked more *interested* than fearful at the sudden presence, but the subtle tension in his form belied his terror. "Interlopers… how unfortunate, Shimura-sama. It seems that we will have to deal with this… *trash* . How unfortunate, that little Kushina recruited a *missing nin* to do her bidding." His hands blurred through a set of seals, almost too fast to follow- the strength of a sannin.

Danzo glared at them balefully. "Those are the actions of a traitor. Konoha cannot suffer rot in its great tree; its great work. Uzumaki

Kushina," he flicked through a set of hand seals of his own, even as Kushina's chains shot across the gap towards them- "you are sentenced to *death* . Fire release: great fire annihilation!" And then the room dissolved to so much rushing flame, Shukaku desperately pulling at barrier seals to shield them from the sudden heat.

Somewhere within the roiling mass of flame a soft explosion sounded, and when the jutsu ended to a Kushina wrapped in defensive chains Orochimaru stood atop an irate manda, *hate* bubbling in his eyes. "Kill them all."

"Foolish summoner. You do not know the powers with which you clash! This great one will smite the foes of Indra, and you shall pay me a thousand human sacrifices for your insolence!" The entire chamber rumbled as *snake* bore down upon them, furious and all too blindingly fast-

Kushina's chains leapt to restrain it even as Shukaku split his attention between the two battles. Against Danzo the earth around them dissolved into so much sand, mountains of rock spilling out of the walls and sweeping through the air toward the shinobi as he easily dodged the deadly restraint of the sand coffin. Even Gaara, weak as he'd been, had been able to defeat jonin- in this moment, Danzo was powerful, but to keep himself alive required all of his attention.

To the battle with Manda, he directed his focus-

As it had been, in that valley at the end of war, so many years ago- he let the instinctive grasp of opposing chakras, eight to two, build up before him with furious force. The entire platform supporting them groaned beneath the sheer weight of its chakra-

Seals bound and restrained the immense snake. Even the greatest of summons were no match for a *bijuu* .

He spat, and the bijuudama flashed through the air, for a single moment digging deep into the snake's side before it unsummoned

itself in a poof of smoke. Orochimaru only had a single moment to Shunshin away from the attack before it slammed into where he'd stood but moments before. Kushina wrapped herself in a cocoon of adamantine chains. Shukaku hid himself between a hundred barriers.

The world exploded in a cascade of falling rock and brilliant light, and when everything settled Orochimaru was gone- and Danzo stood in exactly the same place he had before, completely unharmed. "*Traitor*. I see your *A-rank* status was a clear mistake. No matter. Water release: crescent harvest." Seals started to flash as root nin flooded into the chamber, a torrent of water scything out towards them with enough force to shatter Kushina's chains and smash through their first few defensive barriers.

Shukaku laughed, deep and impossibly threatening as Kushina held off the root ANBU. "I'm afraid you didn't say the words that will see you dead and disgraced." This was… much more satisfying than he'd thought it would be. It seemed Kurama hadn't been completely wrong about *everything*. "I'll do the honors-" chakra built before him as he held out his hands, seething over a distance infinite and nothing at all as Minato poured his *self* through the hiraishin seals- "*Izanagi.*" Danzo's face paled in horror. "And for myself- amenomihashira."

The entire side of the room Danzo was standing on exploded into a cacophony of staggered detonations, faint figures dancing through the blasts of shattering stone and bloody gore with a series of incredibly precise shunshin. Torrents of fire raced out towards him but he was already darting into close range, rasengan spinning on his hands.

Some faint seal spiraled out across the ground- a summoning technique of some sort, and Shukaku bent the swirling seas of sand to his will and *denied* it, picking it apart and tearing it to pieces in a popcorn blast of failing sealwork.

“Shimura Danzo-” then he was close enough for combat to cease meaning anything but a jerky exchange of blows- his so much less than Danzo’s, and even against the immortality of sand he struck *hard* . His seals found no purchase on his ever moving form, slight tricks keeping him *just* out of the reach of his sand as it danced around him in perfect attack and defense combined- “you will not survive this meeting. Your group will not survive the year.” He saw the subtle flinch on the man’s face as the threats drove home. “You will *never* be Hokage. The moment Minato delivered his impossible peace, your hope for ascendancy ended.”

Danzo danced out of the way of another seal as two more root shinobi behind them were swept away in the rush of sand and *crushed* , to blood and death- but the seals that writhed beneath Shukaku’s control weren’t the only one’s he’d painted.

Such was the danger of fighting a Sunaarashi- each moment they left behind another lethal trap, and eventually they added up.

At the end of all, Danzo got to see exactly what Shukaku had done *before* they’d made it to their encounter. Sealwork the size of the Hokage mountain lit beneath the brilliant weight of Kushina’s- *Kurama’s* chakra, spilling out hot and acrid as it coalesced fitfully around his blade as he swung- a foolish experiment. A terrible hope.

All five elemental natures.

Yin and yang.

For a single moment the seal-wrought kunai Shukaku swung was coated in pitch black *nothingness* , chakra more dense than the strongest attack he could make. A falsehood, but as the not-gudodama scythed through the entire mountain in a single flash of black *death* - through Danzo who hadn’t yet the arm and eyes to give- it was convincing indeed.

Shimura Danzo, the root of so many evils, crumpled to the floor, wordlessly crying out in the endless agony of his fate- forever

unfulfilled.

Shukaku sealed his body away into a shard of glass within himself, casting his sand around the room to mop up any remaining root shinobi. It was late, and he was *tired* - exhausted like he'd not been in a long time. " *Thank you, Minato. If you hadn't sent over some of my chakra reserves."*

The voice that resonated over the link was a bit strained, but relieved nonetheless. " *As long as Kushina and Kakashi are safe* ." A moment- *"As long as* you're *safe, too…* "

The aforementioned red-haired kunoichi landed softly in the sand beside him, glancing around for a moment before gesturing quickly down the tunnel Kakashi had run to. "Orochimaru leapt down the shaft. We need to find Kakashi before- before he uses his sharingan for two seconds too long and gets kidnapped!"

Shukaku's voice was dry. "Again." Sending him a halfhearted glare- somewhat unnervingly through the sun-and-moon mask, she sprinted into the tunnel, hair still dancing in nine tendrils behind her head.

No time to waste.

They followed the trail of branching scars of lightning discharged, the root shinobi who'd expected a simple leaf jonin they could easily cut down in small groups. Copy-nin Kakashi had only left behind bodies, humiliated and destroyed.

They found him floors down, tucked beneath mountains of stone and sundered doors- they found him amidst rows and rows of fluorescent lights and shattered glass tubes. They found him in a jungle, trees and *life* growing over every portion of the massive room, bursting into a sea of scarlet flowers, faint figures of agony imprinted forever onto their terrible, ageless forms. Immortality, in a moment-

They found him mere feet from Orochimaru, frozen beneath his killing intent as he slowly packed his laboratory without a care in the world. Of course, the sheer *force* of their killing intent stiffened his posture in an instant- he neatly pounced, producing a kunai in an instant, pressing it hard to the kid's throat. "Oh. So the interlopers have found me." He sighed theatrically, the crook of his mouth stretching just a bit *too* far… "Danzo never did know when a battle was lost. He'd invested too much in this place, see?"

"Hey! Creepy snake dude! Leave Kashi alone! Or- or…" Kushina blinked, scratching at her chin for a moment in confusion as she pondered just what she could actually do against a Sannin. "Um, I'll do something really bad? Like… Kyuubi all over you?"

"You seem uncertain. Either way, you are unimportant." His eyes turned to Shukaku, naked *greed* dancing within their depths. "Your jutsu were *magnificent* - I have never before felt such depth of killing intent, not even across the battlefield from jinchuuriki. The sand body, too! A kekkei genkai- or a technique? The ultimate expression of the Sunaarashi bloodline. How *fascinating* . I'm no Jiraiya, but I'd call Danzo's defeat poetic nonetheless."

"Huh? Danzo didn't have a kekkei genkai? He's like… the super useless one!" Kushina frowned softly- "I guess all of his team was kinda useless? I mean, they were certainly *basic* , ya know, no creepy snakes of frogs or cool silver hair or dreamy teleportation…"

"Frankly?" Orochimaru's face was a mask of nothing but utter loathing. "I do not care. I'll let your missing nin explain Danzo's salvation and demise another time, after you get yourself arrested for high treason. I prefer not to be here when the Hokage comes- without Danzo's backing, these experiments have proven unfeasible."

"Yeah? Well you're not gonna get away with it!" Her chains shot forward as Kakashi *exploded* with lightning, coursing through the Kunai in the moment before it decapitated him and just *barely* managing to fling Orochimaru off. When she spoke again, it was with

the rumbling bass of the Kyuubi, chakra shrouded around her, burning away at her flesh- “ *Die* !”

Orochimaru merely smirked as she approached, a snake slithering around to lay itself a mantle across his neck. “On the contrary- you’re too late!” In a moment-

He disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Kushina bowled into his lab station in a crash of shattering glass and splashing fluids, screaming in fury at the man for escaping her, not a small number of her epithets directed toward the increasingly fearful Kakashi. Shukaku just sighed.

It had been a long day, and he needed to rest.

Tossing the glass shard inscribed with the storage seal for Danzo’s body, to Kakashi he slumped down to the floor, weariness pulling at the edge of sleep. “Kakashi.” He gave him a last smile- reassuring, he hoped. He’d be fine- more than fine, as soon as his current form reconnected with the majority of his chakra within Minato. “Tell your sensei that the man who donated to Shimura wasn’t as willing as Obito-” and, before he had to deal with the consequences, he dispersed back to Minato’s seal.

The small joys of being a bijuu.

Shukaku and Kushina’s destruction of root had been anything *but* subtle, at the end of things- even if the immense chakra from their fights hadn’t been noticed, Rin had informed them the *gudodama* that had torn the sky in two *certainly* had been. Konoha was *terrified* - the streets were abuzz with shinobi, both the regular force responding to the alarms and the scattered root forces converging on the main base tense with anticipation of a battle that wouldn’t come.

Kushina heaved a dramatic sigh as she sat beside his recently recorporeated form, looking down at the shinobi scurrying about beneath them. “That was… something else, huh? I… I guess it really struck me, when I *felt* your killing intent directed at Danzo. You’re not human, are you?”

“Humanity.” Shukaku tilted his head in a vague mimicry of his tanuki mannerisms- a gesture, only. Confusion for a confusing topic- “what is it? If you mean flesh and blood, DNA and genomic expression, then no, I have not and never *will* be human.” They were silent for a moment in that resolute denial, but that was not the end of things. Never had been, in the end. “Our father never meant us to be apart from humanity.”

Kushina winced, clutching at her stomach for a bit. “Ow. That hurts, silly kitsune… I guess it’s just another thing I never thought about before. I put it out of my mind… but you’re *you* . If someone sealed you inside of me right now, I think I’d try just about anything to release you…”

Shukaku nodded, understanding fluttering across his face in stoic sands shifting- “The pain he makes you feel is his own. He loved our father very much, and even now sees humanity’s hatred, their endless bloodshed as an ultimate betrayal of his goals.”

“Man, sounds like a good dad! Wait- was he like a… super big bijuu? All *rawr* , but secretly a softie?” Kushina pantomimed clawing at the sky, and Shukaku couldn’t help but smile at her antics.

“His name was Ootsutsuki Hagoromo. Endlessly kind, patient- he was the best of us, truly.” Us. Humanity. All sentience- everything was encompassed in the breadth of a few words. “We loved him very much, and his death was the last time we were all together- but Kurama held his own special form of hero worship.” He paused, a moment of epiphany standing just at the edge of his mind. “You’re a lot like him, you know.”

“What!” Her exaggerated expression was almost enough for him to laugh. “I’m no daddy’s boy! Minato is a *sissy* , and *my* dad was all doom and gloom before he shipped me off to Konoha! No *way* -”

“Exactly like that. He had a furious temper, always hot-headed. He even had red hair, if you really squinted at it. Nine tails too.” They laughed, together- just an edge of tension that bled to nothing, quietly pulling apart as the *fear* they’d held through their raid came apart.

“You’re pretty nice for a bijuu.” She blushed for a moment, looking away with a sigh on the tip of her tongue. “Um, ya know… I thought about it, and if you’re this cool, then maybe Kurama would… I don’t know. I’m not going to hold out hope, but! It’d be *so cool,* believe it!”

“So?”

“Um… I trust you, is what I’m saying. If you believe you can change the seal to make it more comfortable for everyone, then I’ll give it a go. No funny ideas, okay?” And despite it all, Shukaku smiled faintly…

Looking up at the stars, one of their greatest enemies vanquished, another step made… it was perfect.

Great things…

Danzo is strong, wily, and has the support of Kage level fighters and an entire subdivision of ANBU at his back. He's still no match for a bijuu. Even one with most of its power restrained.

I tried to characterize Orochimaru as someone who's both extremely invested in his scientific reaserch but also this slippery dude who's super good at saving his own skin.

(I also just wanted Danzo dead. He's too weak compared to Shukaku/Minato to be a credible threat when he's not held back by

injuries and stuff, and he's already the obvious Hokage candidate.)

The Yondaime Hokage

Chapter 24: The Yondaime Hokage

This is the story of Uzumaki Naruto, shunned child, jinchuuriki to the nine-tailed fox. This is the story of Namikaze Naurto, savior of the world and best friend to a bijuu named Kurama. The story of a child left alive and slain in equal measure, a hateful child named Sasuke. This is the story of- Hatake Kakashi, Uchiha Obito. The story of Senju Hashirama, Uchiha Madara. Ootsutsuki Asura, and his brother Indra.

This is the story of Black Zetsu, and the lies he wrote across history.

I just started a new work if anyone's interested: Ootsutsuki Happenings. Essentially, it's a what-if where a friendly Ootsutsuki crashes onto earth and (eventually) ruins Zetsu's day. And life. Everyone else is more or less just confused.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

A final week passed, village tense as ever- the five of them hiding away in Minato’s apartment, huddled fearfully around an annoyed yellow haired jonin as he completed the last few days of his recuperation.

Eventually, though, Minato recovered.

Minato landed on Fugaku’s table in a gentle crouch, eliciting a startled yelp and a blazing fireball sent whistling through the air

where he'd been standing but moments before. "Minato! You can't just drop in on us like that!"

"It's important." He glanced down to where Itachi was studiously pouring through ninjutsu scrolls, frown easing into the faint echoes of a gentle smile. "Itachi, can you please leave the room for now?"

"This is *my* house, Minato." A dangerous look glinted beneath Fugaku's eyes. "You don't have the authority to order anything here-"

"Shimura Danzo is dead." Itachi took the serious depth of Minato's voice as a hint that maybe he *should* actually leave, and slipped neatly out of the room with the faintest of pouts gracing his otherwise imperturbable features. As soon as the door clicked neatly shut behind them, Minato gently slid a glass shard onto the table, seals encrusted glimmering with chakra as a body appeared in two parts with a poof of smoke.

Fugaku leveled Minato a baleful glare. "My *table* , Minato. Surely, you understand- Mikoto's going to *kill me* when she comes home to these stains." Professionalism stole across his face in the next moment- "Cause of death?"

For a single instant Minato hesitated- he only knew the barest details of what had happened in the labyrinths beneath Konoha. Shukaku queried, a polite request- and with a sheen of hesitancy still on his chakra Minato allowed Shukaku to *speak* . "False gudodama. An advanced chakra construct combining all elemental types, as well as yin/yang release."

"Really?" Fugaku looked perturbed. "That sounds… appallingly powerful for an attack."

"From my analysis, it required an extensive seal- roughly the size of the Hokage monument- to produce." His analysis had been made in the desperate haste of infiltrating root, and it *still* hadn't produced a true gudodama. Better than anything he'd tried before, though. "It was a trap, not an attack."

“Hm. Do we have a motive?”

Gently, Minato pried away the bandages wrapping around the man’s right eye, revealing a milky white orb. “Technically, he kidnapped my student.” A faint with of perturbed *embarrassment* drifted through his chakra as the thought of calling Kakashi *his* student, and he could hear Minato chuckling in the back of his mind- “the dojutsu theft, on the other hand, made it legal.”

Fugaku hissed, eyes locked onto that single, innocuous orb. “What is it? The bandages would have hid a bakugan…”

“A sharingan.” The Uchiha clan head bowed his head, yet still faintly confused- “it was used to cast Izanagi.”

“How do you know of these things? Clearly *Danzo* knew- but these are clan secrets for a *reason* , Minato. Greed for our eyes is enough without people knowing we can *temporarily rewrite reality* .”

Shukaku pulled back, leaving Minato in full control of himself, that faintly amused smile still curled onto his face. “The bijuu are truly ancient indeed, aren’t they”

Fugaku laughed, smile pulling itself back onto his face. “Of course you would. Only one person would be insane enough to ask the Kyuubi academic questions, and it would be you. I always wondered exactly why Kushina married you- now I understand. You’re the only leaf nin who can *match* her.”

“You don’t know the half of it…”

Against the most sacrosanct of errors, at the council of clans Tobirama merely bowed his head, weary sorrow written deep into his face. “So be it, then.” Not a sound escaped a single one of the gathered shinobi. “Shimura Danzo is a traitor and missing nin to the village of Konohagakure no Sato, from now, forevermore. Danzo, why…” a rattling sigh, as he pulled the hat off his head and clutched

it to his chest. “I am old, and a new Hokage must ascend to protect our will of fire. To show that even now it burns brightly.”

Danzo was dead, root disbanded and reincorporated into general ANBU forces-

Orochimaru was gone, traitor to the village hidden in the leaves.

Tsunade with the next best thing to a missing nin herself.

Jiraiya was still off somewhere, moping about the revelations he’d recently suffered.

The collected clan heads turned to the yellow-haired figure who’d lead them through the war, the man who’d killed the Mizukage and killed the entirety of Kiri’s northern fleet-

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On a sunny spring day, a haze of summer’s heat crowding above streets packed to the brim with civilians high on the frantic energy of peace, at *last*-

Namikaze Minato ascended to the seat of Yondaime Hokage.

“It’s *so* hot, Shukaku. I should have left the robe behind too.”

Shukaku huffed from within the mindscape, attention gently trailing off the towering spikes that cast immense shadows across the verdancy around them. “ *If you wanted to go incognito, then wearing a coat with the words* yondaime Hokage *emblazoned across the back certainly wasn’t a good idea. Why not just drop it off at home?* ” Truly, there was no limit to the convenience of hiraishin.

“But, Shukaku!” Heat tended to make Minato a bit pouty. “It’s *the coat* ! It’s the coolest thing I’ve ever gotten to wear, and I’ve only had it for a few days!”

“ *You’re going to wear it for the rest of your life. There’s no rush.* ”

“Well, nobody’s here to see it anyways.”

Shukaku tried to give him the best impression of rolling eyes through his chakra. “ *Unless Yugito or B are here, and then they’ll recognise you instantly.* ”

The Hokage leapt carefully to the top of a spike, quietly creating a handful of kage bunshin to search through the dense undergrowth clustered around obscuring spires. His chakra had grown enough that the jutsu, once prohibitive to him, was only mildly straining. “ *They’ll recognise me either way, Shukaku* .” Well, that was fair. They’d both gone on missions with him before, and nobody *wouldn’t* recognise a *foreign Kage* sneaking around national secrets.

They were allies, though, so at the very least B wouldn’t be too angry. Probably…

The jungles of turtle island were almost as bad as training ground forty four in the amount of ridiculously oversized fauna they had to beat off with senselessly extravagant barrages of rasengan. At the very least the spikes themselves weren’t covered in poisonous plants, so there was that small mercy-

Eventually, they reached the falls of truth.

“ *Minato* .” The Hokage froze before he could adopt a meditative pose in the pool. “ *This won’t be easy, but there are things that you must know before you begin this test. You’ve made Hokage. The first step is done- and now, it’s time for you to know your fate-* ”

This is the story of Uzumaki Naruto, shunned child, jinchuuriki to the nine-tailed fox. This is the story of Namikaze Naurto, savior of the world and best friend to a bijuu named Kurama. The story of a child left alive and slain in equal measure, a hateful child named Sasuke. This is the story of- Hatake Kakashi, Uchiha Obito. The story of

Senju Hashirama, Uchiha Madara. Ootsutsuki Asura, and his brother Indra.

This is the story of Black Zetsu, and the lies he wrote across history.

Ootsutsuki Kaguya, the princess who dared to break the ancient fear and eat of the fruit of the Shinju, and ascend to godhood-

Once, the Sage of Six Paths had nine children, and of them Ootsutsuki Shukaku was both the youngest and the oldest simultaneously, for he remembered his past and the future of those who would dare to dream. He tried- but his human siblings fought, and brought war to peace once again as Zetsu carefully dragged his fingers through their minds.

Thus was born the Senju and Uchiha.

A thousand years passed- Hashirama built Konohagakure no Sato, and the world followed his lead. Madara tried to destroy everything they'd worked together on, corrupted by rage and the twisted words of my father- and he was slain.

Izanagi is the most terrible and wondrous ability of the Uchiha- Madara lived.

Zetsu, in his infinite machination, carefully put an idea in the mind of a Madara broken to a thousand pieces- bring the power of samsara to the moon, and cast the world in the greatest genjutsu ever made- the Eternal Tsukuyomi. For years he labored to create his reality, and as he died he stole away a forgotten shinobi and twisted them in hate-

Uchiha Obito , spoke the listener in horrified understanding, and the storyteller nodded- he did not know who he was, but they did know his fate. They tried to seal the Sanbi within the third student, to kill her and awaken the deepest madness of the Uchiha. Here, it failed.

This is the story of the world in which it succeeded. Uchiha Obito becomes the will of Madara, and forms a group of S-rank missing nin known as Akatsuki. You die, Naturo lives- he grows, and comes into conflict with these shinobi as they seek to bind the bijuu back into our earliest and most ancient form.

Eventually, the Juubi is resurrected, and eventually, Kaguya resurrects herself from her prison in the moon. By the merest edge- a single blow from a single civilian-born medical shinobi with no special skills beside her mentor's immense strength, the world is saved- and so many die.

That is not this story. Not *yet.*

Minato *breathed* , a deep, rattling thing that pierced the tears he hadn't even felt- "we will not let that happen. I will not *allow* that to happen."

"Then step into the falls of truth." Shukaku's voice resonated with the depth of a true command- "step into the reflection of your darkest self, master it, and in doing so master the Juubi's taint on my chakra. We'll work from there."

Minato nodded-

Stepped forward.

The pool shimmered, and a mirror of all things reflected the mind of one.

From the outside of the mind, Shukaku saw the flickers of infinite reflection, depths of non-euclidian darkness glittering in seas of unnamable color, mathematical fractals wrapping around the deepest expression of soul. As Minato saw and faced the the deepest darkness of his being, Shukaku saw fuuinjustu written into the soul of turtle island, filigree work so fine as to render Shukaku's work but a pale imitation of eternity-

Ancient things crawled at the edges of darkness, touching a great soul to the centrality of the universe, chakra moving in endless revolutions of peace… he saw, but for a single moment all the fathomless distances of whatever ancient thing had wrought turtle island from inanimate to ascendant-

Just a glimpse, and it was gone as it'd never been.

Minato pulled himself from the falls of truth exhausted and more at peace with himself than he had been in years, and as Shukaku's chakra swirled through his coils it found no place on the jagged edges of his psyche. The Juubi's taint didn't tear him apart, even as the full extent of his tail manifested in a blaze of swirling chakra behind him-

Hiraishin swept them away in a twist of intent and chakra to a small island in the vast emptiness of the ocean, frigid winds blustering around them as the waves crashed far beneath their little rock- alone at the edge of cold seas. Remote.

Perfect for, say, something as destructive as the bijuudama. " *So. You will have to mold the chakra I give you-* "

Time passed quickly between Minato's jinchuuriki training, Hokage duties, and life in the village- never a dull moment, yet few times before had he felt so much at *peace* .

Kakashi still occasionally tried to teach him taijutsu, to various levels of success. If he'd never willingly punch anyone at a human, then at least his ability with the glass kunai he forged weren't

Kushina tried to get along with Kurama, and failed every time- but at least she found his older brother's vitriol funny.

Sometimes, Minato delved into the deeper intricacies of fuuinjutsu, picking up the art with remarkable speed. The Hokage's residence had long since transformed into some horrific amalgam of mind-

bending space-time seal work and every mundane convenience known to mankind- neatly wrapped up in seals of sand.

Rin guided him through some of the basics of human anatomy, just enough to allow him to augment Minato's natural regeneration. Minato even eventually stopped getting mad at him for the random jerks of invigorating energy shunted into his coils when Kushina started comparing it to *free coffee* .

Ever so often B and Yugito visited the village, to gift Minato with bad rapping or something- Shukaku wasn't entirely sure as to the *purpose* of their visits, but Minato always took them back to Kumogakure with his hiraishin, so perhaps they just appreciate the free ride. It was nice to catch up with his siblings, ever so often.

B and Minato talked often over the shared mindscape. For all their differences, Shukaku would have even called them friends.

Kushina eventually stopped taking missions outside the village, pregnant as she was with the to-be Naruto…

For a long year, life was good. The entire village relaxed, freed from the threat of constant war, Danzo's child snatching behind them, and Orochimaru but an almost forgotten dream amongst most of the population. All but two.

Shukaku and Minato prepared.

I've more or less written everything for this fic except for the epilogue, so we're pretty close to wrapping things up here. The chapters are a bit shorter with having to cover shorter time periods and all- the final word count is around ~116K.

This is more of an interlude chapter, but starting next chapter we get to the serious action ;)

Naruto

Chapter 25: Naruto

Clutched in Kushina’s arms, dopey smile on her face, was a young Naruto.

Buried in the back of the ANBU standing beside them, gleaming in the pastel dawn, was a bloody tanto. It slid out with a soft shlick of flesh on steel, the ANBU collapsing to the ground as a cloaked figure stood resolute before them- orange mask clasped neatly over their face.

Two eyes stared back at them- pinwheel mangekyou, and the rippled amaranthine of the rinnegan.

Shukaku was too exhausted to deal with this, but his chakra roared in response to the sudden intrusion. “Damn.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Deep in the forests of fang country, two jinchuuriki, a midwife, and several ANBU busied themselves with the various tasks of birth. Chakra hummed faintly through the room, the slight off-pitch distant scream of barriers that shimmered iridescent against the background. Sand shifted, an entire mountain’s worth- precautions.

Minato and Shukaku held their attention against Kushina’s seal as she gave birth; as two unified chakra networks slowly split in a metamorphosis both beautiful and terrifying to sense in sage mode, pulling at the seal all the while.

In the back of his mind, Shukaku could hear Kurama’s furious screams. He ignored them.

The entire night was spent in much the same manner, carefully managing the risks of childbirth while high on adrenaline that Obito could kamui out of *nowhere* , stab Kushina, and run- and by the end of it their nerves were the next thing to fried and they *both* wanted to do nothing more than sleep.

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Shukaku was too exhausted to deal with this, but his chakra roared in response to the sudden intrusion. " *Damn.* "

" *Damn* ," Minato agreed. The barriers should have stopped kamui, but the rinnegan was beyond kamui. "I'm glad to see you alive, Obito. Talk with us, for a moment?"

The masked man flinched, stepping back into a defensive posture. "My name is… I have no name. I am the will of myself and one other. You *do not know me* . A subtle *genjutsu* of all things tried to lay over him as the rinnegan pulsed, mangekyou looping in lazy swirls, but Shukaku still remembered bloody red eyes, eternities- and it shattered against his will. "I only need one thing. Only one person has to die here."

"I'm not going to let you kill Kushina, Obito-"

"I am not *Obito!* " The dust bloomed away from him in the unconscious pressure of his chakra, one eye spinning, one eye pulsing, *sickly* killing intent filling the air. It tasted of decay, growing

roots, and the end of all things- and Shukaku couldn't help but *hate* it. The air between them was charged, still- two opponents carefully inspecting myriad tells-

Sorrow, almost- Kushina, who looked on at the masked figure in horror.

Wrath, against what had twisted his student- Minatio.

Shukaku… he could only feel the moment of fear- the unraveling of plans, for things weren't supposed to go like this. What use was waiting, if he couldn't even save Obito?

Minato flashed forward as infinite geometries of sand exploded out of the ground around them, kunai passing harmlessly through Obito's kamui in a blink of an eye, killing intent carefully reigned in. "If you won't come peacefully…"

Not-Obito glared, yet something within his killing intent spoke of *expectations fulfilled* , dreaming of implacable thoughts. "Hokage. I expected better of you-" he snarled suddenly as space *warped* , pulling baby Naruto from his grasp. " *You-* you should not have stood against me. I could have tried this the easy way, but you are a curse- let the only memory of you be the one who invited death! Shinra Tensei!" And everything was *blasted back* .

It was almost beautiful, as gravity itself inverted for a moment, a perfect sphere of sand exploding outwards in every direction from the masked man, but even before the blast wave reached them Minato was already by Kushina's side- and then they were in northern Kumo. " *Shukaku! What did you do with Naruto!* "

Sage mode flooded across Minato's form before he could respond, enhancing *everything* of his as they landed atop an icy peak. " *I sent him to my labyrinth. He'll be safe there- Kokuo won't let anything happen to him… he also knows how important he is for the future-* " space tore apart in shimmering distortions of black shapes as Obito

stepped onto the mountain opposite of them, too far to hear what he was saying-

A flare of chakra, and then *destruction.* The world exploded around them, barriers flickering and dying as an immense crater was blasted out of the landscape of lightning country. Even before the immense pressure of the technique ended Minato was dashing forward, rasenshuriken rotating fiercely in his hand as he dove toward Obito.

The masked man dodged neatly aside, *shards of metal* detaching from his back and neatly intercepting them as he stepped through kamui. Then he was above them and *they* were the ones dancing aside, flashing away to a dropped kunai before shunshining back at Obito with furious speed. A wall of sand crushed down through him as the rasengan passed harmlessly through his kamui-

“Seven star seal: kamui!” Minato’s voice was rough with the undertones of Shukaku’s chakra as chains of fuuinjutsu erupted from the earth around Obito, binding him- even in Kamui. For a moment the enemy jerked, frozen, before gentle white light shimmered around him, the fuuinjustu’s chakra *absorbed* .

“You *wish* . Outer *path*- ” the word was spat, in anger- “chains of the god’s vessel!” Silvery chains erupted from his hand, arcing- past Minato-

To *Kushina!*

Minato and Shukaku were by her side in an instant, barriers flaring up- but the chains shattered through them the set of some of his strongest barriers as though they weren’t even there. Adamantine chains crashed against them- and for a moment, they froze- before even the golden barrier jutsu shattered apart.

Mere moments before the chains could gouge into her chest Minato flashed them away- to fang country, again. “We don’t have much time to prepare before he’s back, and only a few minutes after that until he’s able to use the deva path again. Shukaku, set up sealing

traps in the sand. Kushina, try and regain your strength as much as possible- if you feel Kurama is trustworthy enough, ask for a chakra transfusion. For me-" he flicked through a set of hand seals before slamming his palms to the ground, summoning Gamabunta, Gamaken, and Gamahiro in a huge blast of smoke. "We need help."

Gamabunta's face twisted into a scowl. "What's the meaning of this, brat! I was enjoying a nice conversation with… well you summoned Hiro' too. What's got you all in a twist?"

Minato just grimaced, motioning to the seam of black and swirling kamui distortion pulling apart the world where they stood. "The rinnegan has the capability to summon immense creatures. We need you to keep them occupied."

" *To wear Obito out. A good plan.* " Space tore open with a blast of rattling chains as they speared the air, elemental wind chakra flaring down their lengths as they scoured into a landscape of sand and ANBU who'd long fled. " *Let me.* " Chakra built beneath their hands, swirling orbs rotating endlessly around each other in a single moment as he *shoved* the jutsu at them. "Wid release: Amenomihashira!"

The toads ducked as the devastation echoed endless around them, fury of wind endlessly centered in a single location- then they were dodging to the side as Obito was behind them, the black squares of an imperfect yomotsu hirasaka fading around him. The sounds of furious taijutsu were only matched by the rumbling crash of immense monstrosities fighting against the three great toads, the thrum of chakra almost painful beneath their skin.

Miniature rasenshuriken spiraled through the space where Obito had been standing but moments before, crashing against the sand in screeching orbs of slicing wind. " *He can use space-time ninjutsu with his rinnegan…* "

Minato scowled as they danced out of the way of another blow. " *So his weakness… isn't. He's literally untouchable, when intangible* ."

Seals danced on the sea of sand beneath them, reshaping entire *aspects of reality* around them as they fought back and forth across a devastated landscape, ninjutsu of all five elements flung around like water.

“ *I’ve been trying to get him to accidentally absorb natural chakra-* ”

Obito paused, held in place for a moment by one of the traps Shukaku had set before. Black geometries shivered the air around him, then *collapsed-* disrupted by the sealing as Minato hurled a kunai at him- and saw it sink into his arm of flesh and blood. His eyes widened- and the earth *bloomed* . Immense trees pulled themselves from the ground around them, racing towards them and Kushina both as Shukaku wrestled them with his sand. “Wood release: binding of the Shinju!”

Shukaku could only stare in dismayed horror as the roots combined into a single immensity- for a single moment before they were moving again, relocating to another site mountains away. “ *He shouldn’t know that technique. He* can’t *know that technique-* ”

Minato looked equally shocked, but Shukaku knew he didn’t understand the gravity of that ninjutsu. “It’s wood release. *Uchiha Obito* has wood release.”

“ *No* .” Shukaku was still stunned as Obito dropped out of Kamui in front of them, a pulse of gravity pulling Kushina towards them in the mere moment of their distraction. “ *Binding of the Shinju was my brother’s* personal technique *. Only one other being is old enough to remember it-* ”

Zetsu.

Shukaku fought the urge to scream. It was *always Zetsu* . The true monsters, the ones he’d prepared his life to fight against- those were Zetsu’s machinations- then they were by Kushina’s side just moments before she reached Obito, neatly blocking the man’s hand

with a kunai as golden chains clashed against the silver binding of the outer path-

For a single moment, Obito looked into Kushina's eyes, and a mere brush of a finger trailed across the seals on Kushina's chest- and chakra *erupted* from her in blistering energy, burning power pulling away at her skin and blood as she skidded back. Her shout was a groan of agony amplified- the screeching of two beings prying for control.

Obito *fell* forward, pulled by gravity- but Minato arrived first, rasenshuriken blasting his body away in the moment he became tangible to land an attack. Sand swirled together to restrain the Kyuubi- only for a lash of burning chakra to crash to the ground where the seals were forming, and a black receiver to stab from the sky between them.

Minato dodged neatly out of the way of Obito's strike, but a point of gravity *pulled* from feet to the right, and Shukaku dropped his concentration to create barriers in triplicate to deny Obito his strike, to bind his wood release, to deflect his outer path chains. "This isn't you, Obito!" You could come back to Konoha! See your family again!"

"I have no family." Blank eyes stared at him from beyond the mask as gravity pulsed again, as blood dripped down the side their rasenshuriken had ravaged, throwing Kushina away from Minato as bones began to sprout around her body and patchy fur bristled at the end of their tails- "I have no name. Not anymore, Namikaze Minato." If he felt beneath his chakra- with the incredible precision of Sage Mode, he could feel the slick of Zetsu as it burned through his coils.

Rin's life had changed so many things.

He wouldn't let it be enough. "Seven star seal: kamui!" Obito jerked to a stop for a single moment more, but it was enough- another seal bloomed out around him- "wind release: seal of void." A rush of wind- a bit of static, and then they stood as a lone island of air in a vast *nothing* .

Obito’s eyes widened beneath his mask- as he tried- and *failed* to breathe, fully flickering away into kamui after a moment of indecision. The bubble collapsed with a clap of sudden wind- and Kurama’s roar as he manifested in full, mountainous form dwarfing the surrounding landscape.

“ *Minato*- ” he *shunted* his full being into the Hokage’s coils, feeling the man grasp onto the overflowing bonfire of chakra in an instinctual understanding of what he wanted them to do- his tail sprouted from his back, ribs of sand exploding out around them, ancient marks sliding neatly over his skin in burnished gold…

Opposite of Kurama, a fully manifested Shukaku swirled into being with the screech of sand and demonic chakra, killing intent matching his own a halo of seals framed them in majestic complexity. Shukaku settled- in control of the body he’d used for almost a thousand years, the lack of strain he almost hadn’t realized he’d been missing…

Space swirled around Kurama’s nose, and a tiny figure- an orange masked man who’d lost himself, again- dropped onto his nose and stared into the immense beast's eyes.

They bled the bloody red of the sharingan- the man collapsed, chakra near exhausted as the vanished in a swirl.

Then, with the abrupt pull of a mountain displacing itself, they were *gone* .

“ *Konoha* ,” Minato and Shukaku thought at once- and then they were gone too.

The Kyuubi crashed down atop the eastern side of Konoha, movements jerky and animalistic as it wept its tails across the town- desperate as it struggled to leap free of its own rampage.

Shukaku understood that terror. Long ago, he’d spent too many years beneath the beguiling influence of a genjutsu just like this one.

With a furious roar- of pain, of Mianto's terror and fury, of his righteous indignation at *another* of his brothers having to undergo his torment he leapt across Konoha's walls, tackling into Kurama and *vanishing* in the sudden displacement of hiraishin.

They tumbled out of the air a mile beyond Konoha's walls, Kurama snapping fiercely at anything and everything, writhing under his own skin as mangekyou eyes screamed in agony of bleeding lies-

In another world, a dome of chains would have locked the world away from Kurama, and Kurama away from the world.

Here, a complicated mesh of sand and spatial distortions did *so much more* . Almost half of Shukaku's chakra poured into the perfect sphere- so long as it stood, they'd have at least a few seconds warning against Obito's arrival- if it came.

Then, again- chains of sand in delicate seal work that burst from the ground and bound Kurama no matter how much he thrashed and tried to disrupt his concentration. With sage mode singing through his being, Shukaku was simply *faster* than him- against his animalistic rage, against the bijuudama he spat again and again- he was simply *better* .

The last of the chains settled against his being, and Shukaku intoned in solemn victory- " *seal!* " Chakra burned as it inverted on itself, pulling together to a single point in a furious maelstrom as it crushed back into- a body. A lone form, battered and horribly burned, floating in a shroud of bubbling for a long moment before even that winked out and she fell into Shukaku's gentle grasp.

Alive .

For all she was injured, Kushina was still alive, and something tense in Minato relaxed subtly at the sight. They'd made it- all their precautions had been for naught, and they'd *still* made it out alive. Gently letting his control fade and the construct of his form condense

back into the Hokage as the barrier faded, Shukaku watched in gentle contentment as he he flashed to the hospital-

It would be alright.

Minato marbled quietly at the sheer *scale* of the room carved into existence beneath the desert, the sanctum of stone layers on layers of incredibly intricate sealwork sunken into the wall. Shukaku had taken him to the second deepest layer of his labyrinth- where Kokuo spent most of his time, and where he'd sent baby Naruto.

" *This is incredible… I see aspects of the final seal, and some of the esoteric space-time concepts… reinforcement, property exchange- this must have taken* ages!"

" *Your son, Minato ?*" The man blinked, momentary breathlessness forgotten in an instant as he shunshined over to where a- shrunken- Kokuo gently played with a happily squealing Naruto. " *At least he's happy* ."

Kokuo glanced up, giving them a… somewhat disturbingly toothy smile. The sharpness of his teeth really defied the equine part of his appearance. "Simple ninshu; my chakra let him know that I carried no ill intent for him. Impossible to fake." His shrug was gentle, if a little hesitant- "it helps that his coils are already inundated with Kurama's energy. I don't think I would have tried this on another baby."

Minato swallowed his objections, gently sweeping up Naruto into his hands, radiant smile on his face. "Well, you seemed to get on well regardless. You do well with children."

"Ah, I… I don't think so? The last time I had to take care of kids…" his desperation locked onto a new, susceptible and entirely unaware target in a moment of indecision- "Shukaku's *amazing,* though! He was *super* important in raising Asura and Indra, after our mother died-"

Minato’s smile turned a bit predatory, and Shukaku couldn’t help but feel a bit of dread. “Well, isn’t that amazing! How convenient- the man I picked as godfather is already good with children!”

Shukaku let that compute for a moment-

No. If he absolutely *had* to deal with being godfather to the most knuckleheaded, unpredictable shinobi to have ever walked Konoha’s soil, then he could at least do it after a good night’s rest. He’d just fought a *rinnegan* wielder! He was exhausted.

Kokuo’s laughter and Minato’s mirrored grin were a nice thing to fall asleep to.

One last thing. He’d *thought* he’d finally get some rest, but in the liminal moments between consciousness and undreaming dark he felt a prod from across the shared mindscape. Faint- bound beneath the entanglement of souls, but far less restrained under his new seal than his old, Kurama’s mind gently requested audience with his own.

They appeared together in the vast stone plain of the shared mindscape, kitsune prowling across the vast distances and nowhere at all with a scowl on his face, chains of shifting reality pulling jerkily at his movements. The moment he saw Shukkau he *growled* , eyes flashing red with fury as he turned on him. “Why, Shukaku, are you always *right!* ”

“What?” Shukaku paused, thoroughly blindsided by Kurama’s gravely words. “I- *what* ? Me- always *right* ?”

“You told us to get along with humans, and I ignore you. They come and kill all the foxes, and then Gyuki and Matatabi go and beat me up. *Then*- then, I experienced the *sharingan* -” they both shuddered minutely at memories so terrible- “and you *still* tell me to trust humans. You tell a human to trust *me* - and I try to kill her. The seal is broken, and I try to kill her.” He breathed, a deep and shuddering-

“and despite it all, when I fall to the mangekyou *again* , she fights with all of her being to free *me!* ”

“Kushina’s an empathetic soul. You’ve been viewing humanity as a singular for-”

“Shut up! Stop interrupting my emotional rant!” Breath heaving, the two bijuu locked eyes- and laughed. Such a random thing, burbling out of the edge of stress and their terrible fate, of life and the mere fact they could. “You’re always *right* .”

“Do you think…” Shukaku was quiet for a long moment as he stood with his brother, together in the vast emptiness of unreality, together in heart- “you would be willing to give her another chance? To work together- if you can manage to truly get her to trust you, to truly trust *her* , then I’ll free you from the seal.”

“Ah… um.” Kurama smiled sheepishly as he settled back on his haunches. “I’d already meant to help heal her burn wounds… the Juubi’s taint is not something so easily overcome, and I thought… but if it’s for freedom, I think I can make an effort. *Only* her, though!”

Shukaku grinned. “Well, then-” but Kurama had already fled the shared mindscape.

Alone at the edge of the edge of unity, Shukaku finally, *finally* fell asleep after a tragedy, triumph- to the ends of fate…

He fell asleep to the silence of dreams, and the dreams of worlds long past.

This was actually the plan for Obito since before I started Lines in the Sand- I wanted to make a character that could actually face against Shukaku/Minato, and who else beside the other being who's been loitering around for a thousand years? You can think of it as- Zetsu's plan with Rin failed, so he had to take more drastic measures.

Obito even here is less powerful than Minato/Shukaku, but he's very much built to survive things; Kamui gives him intangibility, the rinnegan spreads his dimensional access from one to many with Zetsu's knockoff yomotsu hirasaka, and unlike when Konan made him use Izanagi to escape the exploding tags beneath the Ame lake, his rinnegan can get him out of tough situations.

Tears of God

Chapter 26: Tears of God

Konan clenched her hands, the edges of tears tracing lines down her face. “Yahkio was the best of us. Then Nagato was the best of us. Now I am the only one left."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The night after the Kyuubi’s attack on Konoha- abortive as it’d been, Shukaku dragged Minato in the single most important meeting he’d ever been to. A vast plain of empty stone stood around him as they stood together, surrounded by six immensities and four humans-

Shukaku, Matatabi, Isobu, Kokuo, Gyuki, and Kurama- Minato, Yugito, B, and Kushina. All together, standing in a loose crowd in their shared mindscape. If it hadn’t been for the immaterial nature of the mindscape, it would have been the greatest collection of power since the time of the Sage.

Shukaku stepped forward, Minato still resting firmly atop his head- all eyes on him. “I’m glad you could all make it. Gyuki, Kokuo, thanks for arranging this. As you all more or less know, Konoha was attacked by Kurama yesterday- under the influence of the mangekyou. The man who *did* this was a former Konoha nin named Obito, who also possessed the rinnegan.”

Kurama snarled. “Father’s eyes. He used them well- but he doesn't have six paths senjutsu. I know you care about your humans, Gyuki, so you should know he blasted a huge crater in northern lightning while we were running from him.”

“More importantly-” all the eyes were on them once again- “he used two abilities that underline the seriousness of the situation. Wood release: binding of the Shinju, and Outer path: chains of the god’s vessel. The latter is more immediately pressing- he, or another bearer of the rinnegan, have freed the Juubi’s husk from its imprisonment on the moon.”

Fear settled across the faces of all the bijuu present- they knew *exactly* what that meant- but Shukaku wasn’t finished. “Understand this-” he twisted his chakra into a ninshu, impressing on everyone in the mindscape just how *serious* his second matter was. Far, *far* more than the first. “Wood release: binding of the Shinju was Asura’s personal technique, and *should* have been lost with him. However- along with yomotsu hirasaka, a space-time technique that should have been impossible for him to use, Obito displayed proficiency in the technique.”

Kokuo was the first to put it together, and more- he’d been told the story, and knew *exactly* how bad this was. “Somebody told him… *Zetsu* .”

“Exactly. This *cannot* make it out of this meeting. Never speak of Zetsu while not in the shared mindscape.” Kokuo matched his ninshu, the unity of their impression more than enough to quadruple the impact. It was almost killing intent, in how deadly serious they were. “Zetsu is a chakra construct whose goal seems to be strife- and, as the chains show, the eventual resurrection of the Juubi.”

One by one, each of the bijuu bowed their heads, and the humans met in the center- standing, alone this time on the empty blankness.

One by one, they did so pledge, human and bijuu, a fervent desire.

They would not let it happen.

Minato stood in front of the smoldering wreckage of the Uchiha district, azure eyes looking out across the devastation as a stiff

Fugaku and distracted Mikoto stared off in the same direction. Even if most of the village had been spared the damage of Kurama's summoning, the Uchiha and the surrounding clans had been devastated.

A small child stepped up to stand before them, shoulders tense with the emotions he'd not yet learned to hide. Itachi's bloody red eyes stared out toward the wreckage, tracing a pattern in almost-random jerkiness- straight lines, each time to where they'd found a body. "Hokage-sama." His attempts at formality were as adorable as always. "The Kyuubi had sharingan eyes."

Fugaku stiffened beside them even as Mikoto seemed to slump. "It… did, Hokage-sama. I attempted to break the control, but you had already summoned the Ichibi to remove it. It was under a particularly powerful technique. Trust me, none of the Uchiha would betray our village like that."

"The mangekyou." Fugaku's tension only spiraled inwards on itself in a confusing jumble of indignation, fear, and confusion. "Don't worry. I… already know which Uchiha was behind the attack." Minato hissed a breath through his teeth, quietly avoiding the gaze of the clan head's family around him. "...Uchiha Obito."

Mikoto gasped in sudden horror, hand clenching into a fist at her side as her sharingan *spun* . "Poor Kushina… she's always liked that kid. Shuisui's going to devastated that his brother…" there was no more that needed to be said. Kushina and Minato had already gone through the impotent frustration of knowing, *fighting* him, and still being unable to do anything.

"He was a very powerful shinobi when we fought." More than that- between the rinnegan's defensive abilities, the preta's path nullification of juinjustu, and kamui, he was almost *impossible* to pin down. Had he lacked only a single one of those, they would have been able to kill him with almost painful ease. "The clans should have no opposition to you rebuilding your ancestral lands. Did the naka shrine survive?"

“No. It was obliterated entirely by the Kyuubi’s first attack.” There was more anger in that statement then there had been when he’d talked about the destruction of the entire clan compound. Shukaku could understand- the stone tablet had been one of their most sacred possessions. “Itachi is getting restless.” Itachi looked up at Minato with an entirely calm look, before hesitantly fidgeting half-heartedly with his hands. Shukaku fought back the urge to laugh. “By your leave, Hokage-sama…”

He swept away in a shunshin and a pitying look from Mikoto- and then they were alone, again, with the devastation and reconstruction around them. They could have stayed there- alone and together until the sun stretched long on the horizon, but they had a job to do. The Hokage’s duties waited for none-

They flashed away, and only the empty light saw the depth of sorrow they left behind.

Thunder crashed, as did the rain in neverending sheets- the pounding roar of unending precipitation, slamming off the muddy fields and the vast depths of Ame’s great lake. It was unnervingly beautiful in the way it cascaded from the endless gray above, as below- sloughing off white robes emblazoned with red flames as they stuck to the form of a body, nothing more or less.

Storms crashed as ever above Amegakure as Minato walked into its depths, hair slicked to his face, the pernatural perfection of powerful shinobi so lacking from his form. The villagers stopped to stare at him as he stepped off the lake with nary a ripple, their broad-brimmed hats hiding their faces- like specters, shinobi shadows in the rain watching them from the edge of towering skyscrapers.

They did not intervene. He’d made no attempt to hide his presence- they *knew* that a terrible force had walked neatly into their village.

Sheets of paper fluttered on the wind as they stopped in one of Amegakure’s central courtyards, gently contorting as they danced on

unseen winds between the raindrops- a thousand sheafs from all around, coalescing into a single body before them. A woman, whose eyes looked so incredibly *sad* . “Hokage. Arrogant, coming here, after everything you’ve done.”

“We were attacked.” There was a glint, in those too-sorrowful eyes- almost *vindication* . “A man came to us with a rinnegan in his skull, and tried to destroy Konoha.”

“ *That man* .” All her terrible vindication erased itself in a flash of bloodthirsty rage, a fire that burned magnesium-bright for a single moment and faded away beneath the calming pour of Ame’s thunderstorms. “He said he had no name- but he called himself a *god* . Madara, kami- his mask hides *nothing at all* . What do you *want* ? Can you not leave us to suffer in peace?”

“I thought of offering you an alliance, but I can see you won’t appreciate that, now.”

Konan clenched her hands, the edges of tears tracing lines down her face. “Yahkio was the best of us. Then Nagato was the best of us. Now I am the *only* one left."

“I can give you a name.” It felt as if the whole focus of the word was on them- a terrible, unending desire mixed in with the kunoichi’s killing intent- “Obito. The masked man’s name is *Obito* .”

Shukaku stirred within Minato. “ *Don’t punish yourself for something you had no control over, Minato. I’ve done it before, and it won’t end well.* ” Minato just ignored him as the remnants of a name hung heavy on his tongue- the dark memories of a student who’d undone himself.

“Fine, then. I won’t have this conversation outside- we can retreat to… Nagato’s tower.” She dissolved into a sheet of paper that fluttered away through the storm, even as Minato leapt after her through the storm and shattered skies of lightning. Their ultimate

destination stuck above even the highest towers of the city, dark and jagged as it lay silhouetted against the flickers of firmament behind it.

It was warm, within the tower- almost opulent, and *very* well ventilated. “ *This was Hanzo’s place* .” Shukaku supposed Minato’s observation made sense- but it wasn’t his place *anymore* . Every room was filled with beautiful works of origami, vast floral arrangements and weeping vines hanging from the walls- enough to almost make the place look derelict.

Paper pried itself from one of the walls as they stood within the center of a room halfway up the tower, coalescing back into the form of Konan. “You’ve come a long way with no backup, Hokage, but… I suppose I could understand, attacked by someone with the rinnegan as you were. You wanted to trace it’s source. Jiraiya must have told you.”

“Someone else told me, but he was my sensei.”

A ghost of a smile darted across her face. “Perverted, loud, and obsessed with toads? I don’t really see it in you.”

“I have the contract, and you should have seen how much some of the toads make fun of him.” He relaxed, just slightly, shooting the kunoichi a pitying smile of his own. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like, to be a *female* student of his.”

“He told me to visit when I was eighteen.” They both chuckled, softly- “I swear, he’d get a far off look in his eyes for all of us. Nagato had his rinnegan, Yahiko his endless, exuberant optimism, and I bet he was thinking what I looked like in-” they both laughed, sharp and brilliant. “You’re not as bad as I thought.”

“I’ve been famously called emotionally stable. It’s one of my prouder titles.”

“I can see it.” The smile on her face fell off, just a bit- “now, who told you about the rinnegan? Ame has never had many shinobi, and very

few of even those understood the significance of Nagato's eyes. Only Hanzo ever truly knew, and his entire faction died."

"An unaffiliated shinobi. He had horns and dirty blond hair." Konan sucked in a breath. "He told us where the only pair of rinnegan he'd ever seen was."

"The knife…" Konan's whisper was so soft- yet Shukaku could hear it anyways, clinging onto the epilogue of one of his earliest actions. "The man took the knife. Nagato swore he'd never be god- and god killed him. He took only two things- his eyes, and *the knife* ."

"His ultimate goal is to revive the Juubi- through a statue with nine eyes." Konona's eyes widened as she understood instantly the gravity of the description. "With such a terrible power… there are a great many things he could do." Shukaku could feel Minato's hesitance before the last sentence- Obito wasn't Madara.

He was a man with no name. History defied fate.

"Very well, then." A hint of steel flickered in the depths of Konan's eyes. "Tell me about your proposed alliance."

This is totally just a interlude chapter; the calm before the storm if you would.

Two and Eight

Chapter 27: Two and Eight

“Um, now that we’re safe, here, Jiraiya got concerning reports from Iwa. Apparently, their jinchuuriki was attacked and killed by a man wielding silvery chains.”

Lightning scarred hands reached up to brush against his covered sharingan as Kakashi scowled. “I still can’t believe that bastard got an ancient evil and rinnegan just to make him better than me at sparring.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The rush of flame filled the training ground for a long moment as a fire release: phoenix sage fire technique guided a handful of shuriken with inevitable accuracy to a handful of earthen targets Minato had set up for his students.

A few hundred feet away Kakashi was ceaselessly trying- and failing- to improve his chidori, the chirping sound of birds echoing sharply through the air. A few long moments passed- peaceful in the training ground, before Minato dropped soundlessly to the ground between them. “Kakashi, Rin-”

Flaming shuriken *twisted* midair, shooting out towards them as Kakashi’s chidori spiked, losing cohesion, electrical discharge grounding into the earth around him with the sharp sound of crackling obliteration. “It’s nice to see you training, but Kushina and I have been waiting for you to visit for *hours* .”

Rin quickly looked up to the sky, eyes widening at the position of the sun. “Sorry sensei! We were busy working on advanced techniques!

I’m trying to work out fire release: phoenix sage flower crimson nail.” She pulled a face as a spark of red dusted the edge of her ears. “Who even *names* these techniques?”

Kakashi landed neatly beside them, clearly winded from his own training. “They’re from the warring clans era. You’d have known this if you paid attention in the academy.”

“You were only there for a year!”

“Just because I graduated early doesn't mean that I didn’t *extensively* know everything in the curriculum-”

Two hands gently landed on each of their shoulders, halting the argument in an instant. “Kids. That’s enough- Kushina’s waiting for you. Rin- ramen.” The girl perked up, clearly hungry after a long day of using fire release techniques- “Kakashi, I don’t think she’s forgotten your attempt to get kidnapped effortlessly by S-rank treasonous shinobi.” The boy pale slightly as hiraishin swept them away, depositing them neatly in a training ground on the opposite side of the city.

“Whoa! Kushina’s sudden *presence* was almost overbearing in its manic energy- even if two years hadn’t healed the worst of her wounds, they’d certainly only made her into the most power- and *destructive* mother any of them had the misfortune to be around. The number of times the poor walls suffered for Naruto waking everyone up in the middle of the night… “Hey, Minato! They finally got off their backsides to come! But- first, ya know, look what little Naruto’s up to! He was all like- *sand* , and then started drawing in it, and it’s *adorable* .”

Shukaku wasn’t entirely sure it was healthy for one kid to get so much adoration from S-rank shinobi, but everyone crowded around the training ground’s sandpit nonetheless to watch two year-old Naruto’s abstract sand drawings. Of the four of them, Minato was the only one who looked *truly* interested in the art- Shukaku could almost sense Kakashi’s fear of Kushina’s chains from where Minato stood.

Rin- Rin was just polite like that. What a sweet girl. He wondered if she'd been this much of a pyromaniac in cannon, too.

"Right! So, everyone, we're like… uh, so, Shukaku?" Sand swirled out around them in intricate eddies of fuuinjutsu, space bending as four shinobi and a toddler *shifted* , reappearing in the labyrinth's vast heart of stone. Naruto squealed with childish glee as he ran off to where Kokuo slept at the edge of darkness. "Um, now that we're safe, here, Jiraiya got concerning reports from Iwa. Apparently, their jinchuuriki was attacked and killed by a man wielding silvery chains."

Lightning scarred hands reached up to brush against his covered sharingan as Kakashi scowled. "I still can't believe that bastard got an ancient evil and rinnegan just to make him better than me at sparring." The others chuckled softly as Shukaku manifested from sand, cloak settling around his shoulders last of all.

It was almost odd, how vulnerable he felt outside of the seal now, years after making Minato his jinchuuriki. Of everything, that wasn't something he'd expected to happen- but so it was. Stone twisted beneath them with a flex of his will, crystal lattice distorting as a map of the continent impressed itself out of nothing beneath them.

Blooms of color distorted the map- wind and earth country bled a dull red, with the labyrinth alone marked in the same faint white as Ame, lightning, fire, waterfall, and a small scattering of other nations. The land of water and all the remaining nations were black. "Two countries are missing jinchuuriki, the land of water only has Saiken, while lightning and fire are allies… we could attempt to warn Chomei?"

"Kokuo will update the other bijuu about the situation-" the horse briefly glanced up from where Naruto was pestering him, before returning to the troublesome blonde's energetic exuberance. "Kakashi, Rin- I'm assigning you an A-rank mission to Takigakure- update the jinchuuriki about the potential threat, and invite her to visit turtle island. Chomei should be amenable to working together, if they don't already."

“I’ll keep working with Kurama, ya know! You should *see* some of the crazy stuff the silly kitsune can do- like,” she paused, furrowing her brow as she looked at the four of them- “uh, I can see that Kakashi is grumpy… excited probably, it’s hard to tell- Rin is tired, uh, Minato is like… super guilty? Don’t know why.” Everyone looked at her as though she were mad- Shukaku just reminded himself, not for the first time, that Kushina really *was* that oblivious. “Um, and Shukaku is… unending malice? Eh, that’s the Juubi’s thing, right? …right?”

“Obviously. We should head back to Konoha, now…” he sighed as Minato dashed away to inspect the fuuinjutsu on the walls, Kushina left to watch over Naruto, and the two kids threw themselves back into jutsu practice. Right, they *adored* this place. He should have known…

“...*kaku*.” Shifting from the seals he’d been working on, Shukaku frowned at the intrusive thought. It was… faint- perhaps one of Minato’s dreams? “*...kaku! Shukaku!*” Louder. The tanuki gently swirled his chakra through Minato, waking him quietly enough not to alert Kushina. “*Shukaku! We need help! The- rinnegan, attempting to seal Matatabi-*”

Gyuki . That was Gyuki calling for help. Shukaku started, releasing a stuttering blast of killing intent enough to send every shinobi in the house flipping out of bed in a tumble of panicked madness. “ *There’s a situation. Obito is attempting to seal Matatabi into the statue.* ”

“ *Isn’t it far too early for that?* ” Minato *leapt* from where he'd been standing into the closet, tugging on form-fitting shinobi clothes as one of their collaborative design projects strapped armor to his chest in perfect neatness, wrapping the sealed armbands full of hiraishin kunai onto him. “ *Tell them we’re coming* . Kushina, ready?”

A yelp from across the room hastily told them to wait a second, and then they were off- tumbling through space time in an instant-

They landed in the vast crater Obito had made during their last battle to a scene of complete destruction. A fully transformed Gyuki and Matatabi fought in a blurring fast blaze of fire as crushing gravity blasted the blue cat around, S-rank ninjutsu traded between the two sides in a torrent of elemental annihilation that must have been visible throughout the land of fire.

Silver chains erupted from a ravine carved out beneath the remnant of a fire jutsu, carving deep into Matatabi's side as she paused to charge a bijuudama- just enough time for Minato to flash down to Yugito and chuck a wind release: amenomihashira into the crater. It didn't kill him, but it gave them precious seconds of breathing room for an exhausted Matatabi and furious Gyuki to back away from the epicenter of annihilation.

Yomotsu hirasaka pulled the sky apart in geometric mutilation, the masked shinobi shooting forward from the other side of the battlefield as *snakes* of all things poured over the crater wall. " *Kurama, deal with Manda. Minato and I will help the Kumo nin.* " Minato shot forward even as Kushina burst into an immense construct of burnished gold and furious fire, bijuudama charging in her mouth as she leapt across the crater to confront the newcomer. " *We'll seal him dimensionally, then try the piggyback seals to try and disrupt his jutsu.* "

The ground turned to sand for a hundred meters around them every step they took, seals long prepared releasing their chakra into the barren earth below them as hiraishin kunai rained liberally down across the battlefield. Sage mode allowed him to flicker next to Obito no matter the finesse with which he used kamui, inevitable precision striking down at him before he could materialize to cast jutsu.

"Leave me *alone!* You are a *nuisance* -" his voice rattled with a tone just right of human- something unmistakably *different* as a shell of trees grew around him in a thorny barrier. "Shinra Tensei!" Gravity was such a *stupid* attack- Minato rolled with the sudden force pressing him to the ground, flashing over to another hiraishin kunai behind Obito- but not quick enough to prevent an immense *blast* of

chakra from summoning the demonic statue of the outer path into the center of the battle.

A single eye glowed brilliant blue on its head.

The battle shifted in an instant. A sea of viscous chains and spectral dragons roared from the statue's mouth natural chakra whipped into a frothing frenzy around them as the mere effect of the statue's presence disrupted the balance of nature. Chains wrapped around Gyuki, *dragging* him toward the statue as they lashed into Matatabi, lashing out against Kurama but failing against the half-charged bijuudama he'd rapidly bit out.

Minato stared at the statue for a moment as Obito leapt atop it- as it began to *move* , and quietly cursed inwardly. " *We didn't plan for that.* "

" *It's an opportunity that we didn't plan for, but it makes our plans against Obito that much harder."* The earth shifted beneath them as he inscribed seals into the sand around them, floating fuuinjustu littering the battlefield in concentric abominations of gleaming rings. Waves of fire and air lashed out at the barriers as they halted the bijuu's progress, a sea of wood lashing against glittering scintillations of shimmering barriers. " *I fought Hashirama like this, once.* "

" *I suspect this isn't much like Hashirama, is it?* "

" *Not at all.* " A ball of purest black hung in the air above Kushina and Orochimaru's relatively underwhelming battle, drawing both Manda and Kurama into the air as a small planetoid began to crash together. " *Zetsu has invested a* lot *into Obito. It's a single point of failure*- " the seals he'd been drawing locked together in the moment of distraction provided by his chibaku tensei, locking him in place as the statue reached out towards the bijuu- and as Obito tried to escape through yomotsu hirasaka, the *secondary* layer of seals activated.

Shukaku roared with Minato's voice, in unison- "seven star seal: art of piercing!" He ignored the *'the heavens beyond infinite stars'* Minato's original name for the seal had contained.

It was simple, ultimately- the seven star seal restrained dimensional travel by reaching as far out of reality as mere sealwork possibly could and pulling itself along with the dimensional jutsu itself for the rest. The advanced version simply *took something along* .

A set of glass kunai thudded into Obito's chest as a bijuudama annihilated the planetoid hovering above their head- and the explosive tags engraved into them exploded in a brilliant ball of fire and gore. For a moment a wide-eyed Obito looked down at the cavity of his chest, inhuman organs pulsating with desperate black- then he was gone, sucked into an entirely different dimension through yomotsu hirasaka. For one second more, chains lashed into Matatabi- but not *Matatabi* , before the statue dissapeared.

The jagged, silver links smashed through Yuito's body, and took *her* chakra instead.

Matatabi lost *coherency* in an instant, flames blooming around her body as the seal degraded. Orochimaru left with Manda in *another* reverse summon as Gyuki and Matatabi turned their attention to him- it was clear by the naked *fear* in his eyes that he hadn't wanted to deal with Mianto.

He'd put a hiraishin seal on Manda anyways. One day…

On the other hand, Shukaku was trying *very hard* to save both Matatabi and Yugito. Beyond the massive hole in her chest, she was *completely* drained of chakra- the worst case of exhaustion he'd ever seen. If it'd been him in the position, he would have long since dispersed- as it was, his desperate seals to bind Matatabi together scorched her coils with bijuu chakra, and the complicated matrices to separate the two ripped jagged gashes through Matatabi's form-

He *would not* allow it! He'd saved Tora- one set of complicated seals metamorphosed to two, immensely complicated seals the size of a bijuu fitting together from components he'd played with time and again. Frequency modulation… artificial coals, sand to stop the bleeding until he could replace them-

Minato laid a mental touch across his chakra and he stilled, letting intricacies of sand crash to the ground as he shifted to maintaining Matatabi's form. " *She's dead, isn't she.* "

" *Most would have considered that wound inevitably fatal.* You *were very close indeed. I think you could have managed it, if not for the other complications* ."

" *I'll be ready next time.* " Matatabi's form returned to its normal form, blue flames merely smoldering as she gently laid the burnt remnants of Nii Yugito's body in the center of the four jinchuuriki. With a twist of chakra he *pulled* himself from Minato, manifesting a form on equal size with the other bijuu.

Fond annoyance flashed across Gyuki and Kurama's face as the ever-present argument about the unfairness of why *he* could unseal himself without killing Minato flashed between them, but it felt weak without Matatabi's indignant contributions. The cat just stared at Yugito's body, looking so incredibly sorrowful that all the conversation dragged to a stop around it. "I… liked her, I think. Humans go so fast…"

A tentacle laid across her shoulders in reassurance, followed by a hand of sand, and- tentatively, a single of Kurama's tails. Of all of them, only Shukaku had been through this with *humans* . "You'll remember her forever- it's different from how it is amongst ourselves. With us, there's always the option of reconnecting after a time, but with humans the memory of them is the greatest gift they leave."

Minato looked terribly out of place in the discussion, thought Shukaku as Matatabi tried weakly to look away from the corpse,

gaze inevitably sinking back down to the bruised and burned body. “Shukaku… do you think you could seal me in B?”

“ *B?* ” A few simple seals floated around the somewhat panicking Gyuki, who certainly hadn’t expected another roommate- “ah, no. I don’t think so. He’s strong, but I don’t think his constitution is strong enough to contain multiple bijuu within himself. At the very least, I think it will continually damage his coils, shortening his lifespan significantly.”

For a moment the cat looked pensive, before slumping in tired defeat. “I know this sounds… silly, but I don’t really want to leave Kumogakure. Between Yugito, B, and A, I somewhat like the place. I just… don’t want to be sealed again.”

There was a long moment of thoughtful silence between the bijuu before Gyuki looked like he’d been struck by both a poleaxe and several bad rhymes simultaneously, his startled flinch enough to drag everyone’s eyes toward him. “That- *focus* you *brat* -” he blinked, for a moment, before continuing his dialogue with B internally for a few minutes. “My jinchuuriki brought up a good point, Matatabi.”

The cat perked up, flickering flames flaring slightly in response to her interest. “Oh?”

Gyuki sighed, a long-aggrieved look deep on his face. “B says that you’ve essentially described what regular Kumo shinobi do.” The other bijuu- and Minato- looked at Gyuki dumbly for a few seconds longer. “He says A might be amenable to giving you a headband. If not, you can always go to Shukaku’s retreat…”

Needless to say, A was singularly unimpressed when two foreign jinchuuriki, his adoptive brother, and the *formerly sealed* Nibi showed up at the edge of Kumo with his second jinchuuriki in a body seal. His day went from bad to worse when the Nibi hesitantly volunteered to work as *Kumo shinobi* with B’s exuberant recommendation and the *Yondime Hokage’s* recommendation of her character.

A’s desk did not survive the encounter.

Orochimaru had made a *mistake* when he’d agreed to Obito’s offer. Whether he was part of an organization or had just been tempted by Zetsu’s promise of power, he’d underappreciated the true prowess of Minato’s hiraishin.

Kushina, Minato, and Jiraiya flashed into Ryuchi cave two days after their fight with Obito, dressed in fully ANBU gear with chakra brimming at their fingertips. A rasenshurirken leapt through the air mere moments after they appeared-

The marker, after all, had been on *Manda* .

The cave exploded into a cacophony of hisses and screeching wind, tumbling rocks and flashes of light in the sudden darkness- pierced in a sudden instant by the burning glow of Kushina’s chakra cloak.

Manda *roared* as Kurama’s tails lashed against its side, gouging out great chunks of flesh and scales, the cave turning to a river of blood and gore in an instant. “ *Curse*- ” he leapt out to bite down on Minato, only for an immense claw of sand to *wedge* his mouth open. “ *Curse you* ! Ryuchi cave lays its everlasting enmity against those who dare defy the sanctity of the caves! *Bijuu* -”

“You are not our match!” Kurama’s voice rumbled through the very structure of the cave as they landed another blow alongside Manda’s side, only to be constricted by the massive snake in return. “Not- cannot fight our *chakra* -” a wave of maleficent, hostile bijuu chakra swept into the snake, the faint sizzling sound of burning flesh overtaken by his furious roar. “Bring us to your summoner, snake, and we will let you *live* .”

Manda slouched down, wounds dribbling blood and furious anger written in every subtle twitch of his movement. “Curse… you fox. Will you kill us all, to follow our summoner, like they did to the kitsune?”

Killing intent, hot and magnificently furious flooded the room, almost enough to make *Shukaku* step back. Kurama's rage in its truest form. "No… but I will kill *you* . Summon Orochimaru, and you may yet live another day as the boss summon of the snakes. Need I remind you of your… *mortality* ?"

"Curse you." His chakra twisted nonetheless, a faint echo of a *call* shifting through a fuuinjutsu bound to his soul and some contract not so far away.

With a faint pop of air, Orochimaru appeared in the cave before them, and narrowly avoided death by rasenshuriken in the same instant. "Oh? It seems my teammate has finally caught up to me. Needed some help, though." The subtle tension in his motion as he leapt away, though- the twitchiness that only the presence of truly overwhelming threats gave off, gave away his true intentions as he leapt dodged Jiraiya's rasengan. "Manda, for this betrayal our contract is null and void. I wish upon the white snake sage to see you dead at her feet. Earth release: rock lodging destruction."

He slapped his hand against the side of the wall- and the whole cave began to crumble to the sound of an infinite panicking hisses as the snakes fled through the uncountable warrens that hid them. Minato flashed forward, sage mode and bijuu chakra singing in his coils as he got *just* close enough to watch him fade seamlessly into the rocks.

With a curse Minato jumped back to Kushina and Jiraiya, scooping them up to teleport them away-

In the moment before he left, Shukaku sent a single thought- Minato couldn't chase Orochimaru through the earth, where hiraishin meant death… but *Shukaku* could. Their chakra spun and split halfway even as a wave of sand arched- a cathedral built of instantaneous reactions, falling boulders suspended for a moment beneath above a metamorphosis… and then the Hokage and his strongest shinobi disappeared.

Then the roof collapsed.

Darkness. His sand was him, and he was his sand as it flowed through the ever-present cracks in the foundation of the world unseeing, subtly sensing as he contorted from his natural form to this seeping, crawling through the earth. Wind and earth ground together in his passing- a maelstrom that called for the death of snakes and the inevitability of confrontation as he *moved* .

It was an unnatural distortion of himself- but as he slowly, *inevitably* traced Orochimaru's panicked flight through the earth's lowest depths, he couldn't help but smile. Soon… he raced forward as he felt Orochimaru's chakra presence *drop* - stutter, fall into a pattern like *running* , and burst out into a vast cavern he'd never heard before. Rotten wood crumbled into dust and ancient mold as he leapt out into the tunnel the size of a bijuu.

Natural chakra *hummed* here as he moved- pushing through the very fabric of his being in the mere second he stood still. An abundance of *life* in the otherwise decrepit hall, almost oppressive in the way it pulled at his very being. So familiar…

It lulled him, faintly- the memory… of something that never was.

He ran.

Orochimaru *tried* to run, but one significant advantage to being the size of a mountain was being very fast indeed. A wave of sand swept the snake sannin off his feet as he bounded forward, crushing him against the wall as his eyes shimmered and shifted to bottomless pools of gold. "Sand coffin." No matter how much the man struggled, his grip was inescapable. "Orochimaru. I am going to ask you some questions, and you are going to answer."

"Oh well. I suppose I've been caught, haven't I?" His personality was incredibly disorienting, the way he just… languidly relaxed, pinned to the wall as he was. "I suppose I can consent to an interview."

“Six star seal: activate.” The snake sannin stiffened as destructive interference shivered through his chakra coils, locking it away from his use more tightly than any chakra suppressant. “Answer me carefully- why did you choose to work with Obito against the Kumo jinchuuriki?”

“ *Obito* ? Truly?” The man blinked, for a moment stunned before he relaxed back into his languid posture. “Hm, I didn’t expect the truth of his existence to be *that* . He introduced himself to me as the Will. Of what- he never said, but he paid *extremely* well for my continued cooperation. Stabilized wood release, for one- and, upon the successful capture of three bijuu, he offered me genetic sampling from the *rinnegan* .”

Shukaku smiled, and it was a crroked thing. “Well. I think I know enough, now.”

“To release me? You can keep me here- but you can’t *stay* here. I can see how the energy of this broken dragon vein lulls you, weak as it is.” He shrugged nonchalantly- “you either kill me, here, or die down in this accursed darkness together.

“Not exactly.” He felt the natural energy- the faint traces of wood release remnant from when the tunnel had once been a root of the god tree, and painted seals in a compact, *complicated* mess of overlapping interconnections. “You assumed that Minato was the only one able to perform space time techniques.”

He barely had a moment to react before space opened out beneath him and he landed on Minato’s desk.

Two and a half months of intensive Yamanaka investigation later, Orochimaru was executed in the depths of torture and interrogation as Jiraiya watched with eyes that spoke of endless sorrows, his teammate’s last words to Tsunade penned in a letter clutched tightly to his chest.

The leaf relaxed in gentle susurrations. The last of their monsters was dead.

Eventually, Chomei joined the bijuu in the shared mindscape, an energetic child jabbering on her head as the others spoke of matters to her in careful code.

Saiken’s jinchuuriki went missing.

Yugito was always supposed to have been killed, but the whole thing about Matatabi staying as a Kumo shinobi was very much inspiration in the moment; previously she was going to go join up with Kokuo in the labyrinth. I think it fits her character more, though.

The End of Eternal Things

Chapter 28: The End of Eternal Things

Minato scowled, his hiraishin kunai slamming to the ground beneath the force of Obito's shinra tensei. "I ensured that no living enemy would want to work with Obito."

"Not living." Shukaku projected his voice to Minato and the other bijuu, grim. "The Outer Path has dominion over the dead. Samsara is undone beneath its gaze."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Three years passed in a blur of international tension and ridiculously high scale battles that flared across the continent on the flip of a dime. Obito was *strong* , and Zetsu was masterful in his execution- but not as strong as Shukaku. The ability to teleport most of the world's bijuu to each other's side was admittedly instrumental in stopping him from actually *capturing* another of them.

In other news, Konoha eventually got used to their Hokage's ever variable sleep schedule.

Kakashi finally started to relax, mostly in response to Tenzo's own unflinching seriousness. The two were good friends, and experts at avoiding the blindingly green ball of energy known as *Gai* . Naruto loved the man, much to everyone's eternal suffering. Their eternal youthfulness, too.

Minato had hit him over the head when he'd said that one, and Kushina had laughed at them all for being so afraid of the taijutsu master's suspiciously strong *yin-yang release genjutsu* . How he'd managed that, Shukaku would never know.

Jiraiya published more books, and even came to check up on Naruto now and again. It was almost ironic- he had a greater presence in his life now that he *wasn't* the boy's godfather. The time he'd come to get medical treatment from Rin after getting beaten within a near inch of his life by Tsunade for… unsubtly… basing one of his characters off her was still legendary in the village.

Shukaku sighed in silent contentment from where he and Minato watched Rin and Kakashi spar, furiously trading blows and crackling ninjutsu. Kakashi *was* better, but the… very burnt state of the forest around them was testament to her ninjutsu prowess. " *Kakashi's going to run out of chakra soon* ." The flashing light of chidori burst into the clearing as he rushed forward, only for one of the hovering fireballs to crash down against his chest with furious inevitability and toss him back. " *He still relies on his sharingan too much, and it drains his chakra.* "

Minato watched impassively for a long moment more before calling the match as Kakashi started to slump with exhaustion. "You're right. Kakashi, continue your work on stolen jutsu- ensure that you can use them *without* relying on the sharingan, and keep working on limiting the dojutsu's usage during the fight. Rin, your control is as ever impeccable, but you don't have the chakra to waste on large-scale attacks like the ones you were using."

The girl pouted as her hands glowed green, kneeling to erase the burns wrapping around Kakashi's chest. "Sorry, sensei! I learned from the best-" she shot a pointed glare at Kakashi, who only rolled his eyes back. "Plus, it's not *my* fault that all the less chakra intensive fire jutsu are just… ridiculously weak."

"Then make your own. I know you already altered fire release: fox fire into your fire-senborn, so you have the requisite knowledge to create your own." Rin looked thoughtful for a moment, before nodding. "Now, again. You're free from missions today, so we'll stretch your coils today and take a break from sparring tomorrow." His two students bowed- and then fire and lightning erupted through the clearing once again.

A few days later, Kushina and Kakashi- begrudgingly- ate their lunch together in the forest above the Hokage monument. “Couldn’t Minato make it?”

“Yeah! It’s no fun without the sissy! At least I don’t need to take care of Naruto…

Rin dropped from the trees, landing in a crouch beside them just silently enough to startle both jonin. “Sorry! Sensei roped me into investigating a breach in the sensing barrier.”

“Did you drop by Hizashi’s place to visit Naruto?” Her eyes sparkled in earnest solemnity as she dutifully looked out for her son’s well being. “Wait- more importantly, is he getting *ramen?* ”

“He wasn’t at Hizashi’s place when I checked. Maybe Sasuke?”

“Maybe…”

“ *Namikaze!* ” The door to his office slammed open, wood splintering apart as it hit the paneling. Two ANBU dropped neatly down from the ceiling, blades bared at the visitor’s swirling Sharingan. “Where the *hell* is Sasuke?”

“Desist, Fugakug-sama, or we will be forced to use-”

“Stand down. Explain yourself, Fugaku. I’m busy dealing with a potential security breach, and my son’s ran off…” Shukaku *clicked* to a realization, sudden panic racing through the Hokage’s coils. “ *Damn* . This is… very bad. Tiger, mobilize the ANBU and put the village on emergency lockdown, code purple- utilize the correct defensive barriers for critical areas. Cat, sound the appropriate alarms- Jonin only threat.”

“What about *Sasuke* ?”

Shukaku burbled in panic- haste. They needed to be *hasty* , lest they lose them *both* . “We have reason to believe they’ve been kidnapped.” Indra and Asura- questions raced through Shukaku’s mind as Minato teleported to Kushina and his students in a burst of agitated chakra, pressing a thin tendril of sand to each of them and yanking them unceremoniously to the shinobi armory. “Naruto’s been kidnapped, along with Sasuke. Shukaku thinks it’s Obito- the masked man’s fault.”

“We’ll stop him, believe it!” Kakashi just looked like he’d be sick as he sealed extra kunai into his mission bag.

Rin… Rin looked *ready* , bristling with Obito’s old determination as she pulled out a handheld map. “Potential areas of interest?”

“ *Mountain’s graveyard. The Ootsutsuki ruins in the land of fire. The literal moon- or anywhere else.* ” Minato dutifully relayed the information, earning him a scowl from the others. “ *Send Rin to alert Konan- they get along nicely. Kakashi will alert Chomei’s jinchuuriki, and Kushina should notify B and Matatabi.”* A seal etched itself over the wall, pinprick impossibility folding open as a shard of glass slipped from Konoha to the depths of wind country.

Then everyone disappeared. Minato’s chakra twisted fourfold, delicate sealwork he’d drawn in sand duplicating the hiraishin directional component and sending them to their respective locations. *Minato* landed atop the labyrinth, sage mode stretching out, then again, sensory seals enabling him for just an instant to feel almost the entire continent.

A hint. All he needed was a *hint*- there. Somewhere in central fire, not altogether far from Konoha… he flashed to his closest marker, an old Kunai from the third war, and came upon a scene of verdant overgrowth swept in a valley which had long since faded from the memory of mankind. Shukaku *recognised* it, though- the mountains, the shape of the river were even so different… “ *these are the Ootsutsuki ruins . Indra burned them down with Amaterasu and Asura covered them with wood release* .”

Minato dropped to the ground, body tensed as he looked for the faintest trace of his son's chakra. "*Is there anything remaining? Somewhere large enough for Obito to stay?*"

" *The only place that might have survived the initial destruction and the inevitable march of time would be my old warren* ." He projected subtle directions into his jinchuuriki's mind, guiding him in a series of rapid shunshin across the once-familiar, ever foreign landscape to a massive cave that had been carved into the rock long ago. It was clear it had been inhabited more than once, recently, but other than the lingering taint of chakra it was otherwise empty. " *Unless Zetsu knows advanced sealing- and I wouldn't put it past him- then this was a diversion.* "

" *Damnit!* " Sand rushed out as the stone beneath them dissolved, painting the entire cave in a geometric repetition of a simple chakra conducting seal- just enough to disrupt any sealwork.

The cave was empty.

Cursing, Minato flashed over to Kushina's side as she argued excitedly with A over the danger of the situation and that yes, they *did* actually need B and Matatabi to take part. He didn't wait long before grasping all three of them and teleporting away to Ame just as Konan dropped neatly to the ground with an immense gust of her paper wings. "He wasn't at the Ootsutsuki compound."

"He's not in Ame. Nagato's sensory technique would have been able to sense them. My jonin are are on defensive measures. I'd like to know *why* , though."

"Yeah, fool, ya fool! B and lord bijuu gotta know, why we gotta go! It's important to share, and prevent a spare-" there was the faint flicker of chakra in the sensation of something immense hitting B from within before he silenced himself. "Fine, fine…"

"Two main reasons." Shukaku's deep voice spoke from Minato's throat, causing all the jinchuuriki to perk up in alertness, and the

other shinobi to tense in wary anticipation. When Shukaku spoke, their little group tended to *listen* . “His attack on Konoha is an escalation- he holds the potential to destroy an entire village if not kept on his toes, so any escalation on his part is *bad news* . Secondly, Naruto and Sasuke are extremely important individuals.”

“Huh? Naruto’s important! Ya know- that’s super cool, B? I wonder-” Minato silenced her with a glance, ignoring the sheepish blush that spread across her face.

“Both of them carry the chakra imprint- or, rather, the soul- of two historically important figures. Naruto, Asura. Sasuke, Indra.” The bijuu collectively blanched at the information- two people they’d never wanted to see again, not after their last deal with reincarnates had turned out so disastrously. “We’re not sure *what* exactly he wants to do with them, but it’s critical we prevent it.”

For the second time he *twisted* his chakra into the base of reality, sensory seals forming around him as he pushed his range across the entire continent- and *there* . Northern Iron, another faint trace of Naruto’s chakra, coupled with the vast distortion of the demonic statue. He sent the information to Shuakaku, and got a grave response in turn. “They’re at the Mountain’s Graveyard.”

The seven of them reached out- a single brush- together, and hiraishin swept them away.

They appeared atop one of the immense skulls, antlers ancient and weathered cutting jagged figures into the sky behind them. For an age it was just them, alone in a sea of verdancy and pale bones. Silent.

Then, *force.* An immense wash of fire carved through the valley, sweeping along with the contours of the valley as it obliterated everything around them in a sheet of brilliant incandescence. Gravity smashed the skull they’d been standing on to pieces seconds after

the shinobi leapt away from it, followed by the shearing force of a sea of verdancy that swept after Matatabi.

Konan leapt away with a single beat of her wings, paper swirling together as she remade complex fuuinjustu, blades of wind from that faraway source crashing against shimmering barriers and getting reflected sideways. “This doesn't feel like one enemy!”

Minato scowled, his hiraishin kunai slamming to the ground beneath the force of Obito’s shinra tensei. “I *ensured* that no living enemy would want to work with Obito.”

“*Not living.*” Shukaku projected his voice to Minato and the other bijuu, grim. “*The Outer Path has dominion over the dead. Samsara is undone beneath its gaze*.” Chakra spilled out of Shukaku as he assembled his form, natural chakra flooding through his essence in golden iridescence as Minato mediated within him. “*It takes extreme lifeforce to resurrect someone, and he doesn't have access to the edo tensei, so I sincerely doubt he could summon more than one or two shinobi to fight us*.”

“Powerful, though! Kurama can sense their emotions- there’s only one! He’s super duper mean, though!”

Shukaku swept his senses out to the source of the faraway bombardment, and winced. “ *Uchiha Madara. Konan, B, Matatabi, fight Madara. Even resurrected, he likely doesn't have his dojutsu. Kushina, we’re going to fight Obito. Rin and Kakashi need to sit this battle out.* ” The two young jonin scowled, but swept away in a shunshin nonetheless- and then they *ran* . Meteors of flame crashed down at them from that faraway peak, gravity distorting as they danced through the attacks forward, crossing miles in seconds.

Matatabi, shrunken to the size of a small housecat, leapt atop Konan’s shoulders with B racing by their side in his full bijuu transformation as they split away from himself and Kurama to fight Madara. Obito hovered before them- wreathed in the subtle *impression* of chakra, floating demurely in the air above them. “You

made it. Fire release: great fire annihilation!” An immense wall of flames bore down on them, slit neatly in two by a thin blade of sand and sealwork. “You’ve made yourself a *nuisance.* Zetsu said it shouldn’t take long, now.”

He stepped neatly into Kamui as a bijuudama blasted through his form, retaliating with a twisting construct of wood that reached out to ensnare the two bijuu before him. “Obito!” Minato’s voice went unheeded as a spar of wood shot through where they’d been seconds before, earth fractured beneath the strength of their sudden leap. “What are you *doing* - don’t you understand the gravity of the situation! Zetsu isn’t working towards your goals- he’s trying to bring back his mother, Kaguya.”

The masked man cocked his head, unsettlingly blank in the momentary lull. “I know.” Shukaku felt Minato falter beneath him and deftly grasped control of the wind release: amenomihashira they’d been preparing. “Life is betrayal, is it not, sensei? My family betrayed me, and then I got a team. My team betrayed me, and then I found Madara. My *love* betrayed me to become a monster, and I found Zetsu. Madara betrayed me, and I found that life is war, and to sleep is peace. I will have *peace* , Minato. I will have peace…”

The mountain beneath the exploded as their wind release: amenomihashira obliterated the stone and ancient verdancy, sealworks against his dimensional shifting materializing out of the annihilation beneath them. Snarling, Kushina leapt into his battle side by side-

A flash, flickering across the landscape. Falling through a void of cubes and tearing open the very sky to follow Obito. An eternal conflagration from Madara as he fought, and died.

Bijuudama. Bijuudama after bijuudama, spat from the other mountain, crashing through Obito as he desperately tried to use yomotsu hirasaka to escape before he reached the limits of his intangibility.

Rasengan, biting into flesh as a student, one, screamed, blue stained with whispers of red for only a moment as it *ground* -

Kushina, screaming for a moment as she wrested Kurama from the mangekyou.

Burning chakra, pouring through Minato's coils, his being- as the preta path attempted to destabilize Shukaku's sage mode. The willpower, the absolute centrality that made him *fail* .

An attempt to use the human path against him, and the satisfying visage of Obito's horror as he realized what the bijuu *truly* were.

Paper, hundreds, thousands of tags expanding into *his* eight star seal, just in time to let them lock his chakra for a moment- just too late to stop the demonic statue of the outer path from smashign through the mountainside beneath them and grasping Obito in its invulnerable hands.

Minato landed without a flicker of movement, watching bijuudama splash off against the statue's defenses as it dove back into the mountain beneath them. "Konan! Get Rin to heal you! B, help Kurama recover from Obito's mangekyou. Matatabi- with me! We won't let Obito escape!" The blue cat leapt onto his shoulder as they jumped into the massive chasm below them, bounding from wall to wall as they entered the abyss beneath them.

Spears of earth release chakra ran through the sides of the cavity, visible only to sage mode- destabilizing it as Shukaku threw immense pillars of sand, Matatabi melting them to glass to solidify their support. The cascade of rocks continued unabated for seconds- and then they exploded out into an immense cavity, the Ootsutsuki clan symbol engraved on ruined stone walls.

Kaguya's palace. When she'd been human- before she'd eaten of the god tree and evolved to monstrosity. Hagoromo had buried the place long ago, in his battle against the Juubi, and the twisted taint of the Shinju hung heavy over every piece of rotted wood and long

dead dust. The statue stood in the center of it, natural chakra swirling around it in a vortex as chakra absorbing dragons erupted from its mouth.

In the center of the room, suspended from the ceiling- two limp bodies, impossibly small and limp as they hung from silver chains. In less than an instant- in the moment of spontaneity, Minato shifted through space- shunshin and Shukaku's space-time seals smashing into the chains and tearing them asunder.

The two children were cold as he gently set them down to the ground. Breathing- barely, but *too cold* . The killing intent that seethed in the room between the two parties was truly monumental as Shukaku gently teleported the two children back to Konoha. "Obito. You were like a child to me… but you're very, *very* lucky indeed that you didn't kill those children."

The masked man shrugged from where he stood atop the statue, black receiver balanced neatly on his hand. "They're just kids. All I needed was their chakra- it's not like I *want* to kill civilian kids…"

"They won't grow up anyways, if your plan comes to fruition!"

A wry, *cruel* tilt of his head flickered across Obito's face as he gently cast his mask aside, scarred skin pasty even in the unnaturally even light. "So you're arguing for your kid's death? I'm sure that can be arranged."

"This isn't- wasn't like you, Obito. You used to help the elderly cross the street. Your happiness was neverending. You used to be so *cheerful* , Obito- can't you remember that?"

For a moment, he paused as *something* shifted beneath his skin, before slumping ruefully. "It's far too late for me, Minato. Honestly, I'm sorry that you had to be the one to experience this. You should have just died, those years ago when I came for the Kyuubi." He raised the black receiver above his head- and before Minato could block him, slammed it *through his hand* and into the demonic statue.

“Two halves make a whole. The legacy of Kaguya, repetitions forever- the end of eternal things. It tastes… so *beautiful* .”

With a shiver of natural chakra, divitiny impressing itself onto the world as much as Hagoromo’s had all those years ago, two orbs of deepest black floated into existence behind Obito’s back as his skin lost the rest of its pallor.

Then there was annihilation.

A blade of utter blackness pierced Matabi’s flank in the moment before Minato hiraishined to the side, imploding the mountain- imploding the very nature chakra behind it as it swept through reality. Seals flickered, desperate efforts to bind, barriers shattered in an instant as the blade sliced the very bedrock apart.

He appeared next to the recuperating warriors for just seconds before the mountain's graveyard exploded behind them, Obito hovering gently above them all. “It’s futile! Everything comes to an end, and this is *yours!* ” His chakra unfolded outwards as the gudodama sheared through where B had stood, barely deflected off his tails. “Watch!” Black drained through the ink in his face- a smile that looked too wide, a sudden horror- “I have everything I need, now.”

Kurama’s bijuudama deflected off a shield of purest black, there in a moment, gone the next-

“Asura and Indra combined. Six path senjutsu. The sharingan. The *rinnegan* . All for this moment- here I do overwrite the boundaries between truth and falsehood! A dream, for mother-” Obito’s hands twitched- “Izanagi.”

He closed his eyes, one blind forever to the a future it would never see-

The other opened to, rippled red and swelling with nine tomoe, and looked to the moon. The rinnesharingan looked upon earth once

more, one last time- and judged it *unworthy* .

Obito cried tears of blood once more, and the moon surrendered to him its ancient burden.

Kaguya descended, and was reborn.

Plot twist :O

I was trying to think of something wily that Zetsu could pull off, totally unanticipated by our dear SI, and this is it: taking the two parts of Hagoromo's chakra and squishing them together until six-path senjutsu bleeds out the middle.

Also: Inzanagi is ridiculously overpowered, and hilariously underutilized in canon. Yes I know that if this was possible in canon then Madara would have done it, but we can call it a last ditch effort by Zetsu or something- after all, with all the jinchuuriki and bijuu working together Obito wasn't going to be getting his hands on them anyway...

Lines in the Sand

Chapter 29: Lines in the Sand

Lines in the sand, cusped in their grasp the knife's edge of existence.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Ootsutsuki Kaguya stared at the shinobi that stood before him, mild curiosity written across her face as her robe dripped the white unreality of her form, the monstrosity of chakra that had once been sealed in the moon. Three eyes watched in wary fascination as sand swirled below her, baukugan tracing the movement of the chakra as it twisted and contorted in intricacies of sealwork. "So it seems you have done great things with my chakra. It sings for me, your essence… without it I am *incomplete* . Return to me. Give me *back my chakra!* "

Space unfolded around her in a dizzying impossibilities of black cubes, and spinning places as the one moment she was *there-* before them, where Obito had stood, and the next ash killing bones cut deeply into Matatabi as she drank deep of her chakra.

The Nibi died with a shocked expression on her face, almost too fast for anyone to see it. For a moment Kaguya shivered, features rippling into a pale white paste as Matatabi's chakra settled into her coils. "How… delicious. Who's next?" She disappeared into another swirl of distortion, impossible attack just barely dodged by Kushina in Kyuubi mode. "Let me *taste* . Give it back. *Give it back!* "

Minato leapt from where he'd let Shukaku's construct fade, sage mode and Shukaku's chakra turning him into a blur of speed as- " *I'll hiraishin them away. Focus on sealing her.* " Their allies disappear

one by one in the space of a second, the very last movement sending a kunai skidding off Kaguya's ash killing bones. "It's our chakra, anyways."

" *Impudence* . Black Zetsu poked from her sleeve as they danced in a match of furious taijutsu, his soft words whispered inaudibly through the vortex of nature chakra that converged on Kaguya's form. "Your chakra is mine. No matter how far you run, no matter how many barriers you put between us, all life will eventually return to *me* ." He wondered if this was what the god tree had looked like, this insatiable hole in the world that consumed all, swirling down onto her very being.

" *We need to get her to Suna-"* the rinnesharingan on her brow pulsed with the etheral thrum of chakra as the world tore apart around them- sending them tumbling through the skies of a vast volcanic landscape-

They were no longer near Suna, thought Shukaku with a bitter laugh.

They were no longer near *earth* .

Rasenshuriken sparked in the air above them as they drove blow after blow into the space between them as they blurred and slashed- two deities dancing around one in mirages of chakra and power to break the very land around them apart.

Reality broke, and then *gravity* pressed down on them- almost enough to crush them beneath its weight as Kaguya floated serenely above them. "Surrender. Ash killing bones only hurts for a moment… otherwise…"

"Never."

"Very well: eighty gods killing attack." Chakra *exploded* from Kaguya as the very landscape was obliterated around them, the planet crumbling beneath the sheer *force* of the attack. Its strength was

such that even hidden behind a barrier that shifted them halfway out of phase.

“ *Now!* ” Just as her rinnesharingan pulsed, sand lashed out in a seal not so different from the ones they’d used to hurt Obito, graphing the jutsu and *throwing* themselves orthogonally away from the locus of its directionality. Kagya screamed in rage as they *split* -

“Fools! You *fools!* To choose a fate…” her voice faded into the distance as they drifted through eternal black, nothing and something around them. It had been a desperate hope, a last gambit that just *maybe* they’d make it back to earth.

As they drifted in the infinite dark between worlds, Shukaku let himself be bitter that it’d all come to this.

Time was immaterial outside of space- it could have been a second or a million years they fell between the cracks between dimensions, talking about everything and nothing at all. Remembering together all the little parts of life they’d forgotten over the years.

The touch of sun on their skin. Laughter, rippling between the silence of shrine bells. Flowers blossoming. The vast austerity of sand, and how the wind had always swept the dunes along in their endless dance, crashing like waves in a maelstrom.

Minato spoke of his childhood.

Shukaku spoke of his. Spoke of the depth of self he’d never told anyone other than Kokuo, the inadequacy he’d felt, the abortive suicidal attempt. Minato’s hand in his sand, gentle, caressing him as they remembered silence.

He told him, after an eternity and no time at all, how bitter he felt- he’d spent a thousand years walking a tightrope to preserve the future, and in the end it hadn’t even been worth it. Zetsu was just smarter than him.

Minato had hugged him-

Waited.

Something *shifted* , chakra tearing open an aperture as something settled neatly in their shared mindscape. “Hello, Shukaku.” A voice, weary with age- a silence, so profound after he spoke and time reasserted itself as *real* . The tanuki looked, so hesitantly and saw-

Worried, amaranthine purple eyes and short horns. An old face, weary with the wrinkles that had bowed him before his death, the gudodama that had crumbled to ash floating in a gentle ring beneath him. Nine and one, a staff across his lap. Shukaku’s eyes widened as a grin split his face. “ *Father* . You… you came.”

“It was difficult, but simpler than it could be.” His smile was so *warm.* A beautifully radiant thing that reminded him of all the good in the world. “We both exist in this moment beyond time and space, where I have spent a long time living. Ootsutsuki are hard to kill… of course, you have a plan, though.”

“I… you’re here for Minato, right?”

“No, Shukaku- I only have *one* son in this room. I’m here for *you* .”

Shukaku skittered back, momentarily stunned as *horror* wrote itself across his face. “You- you *can’t* . To give it to me would mean that it would remain forever. You wanted it do *die out* -”

“No- never that. I wanted it to be used responsibly, and neither of my sons were mature enough… I don’t think you were, either.”

“But I am now.” Shukaku leaned his head closer, feeling Hagoromo press his hands against his forehead. “I… I understand. I really wasn’t mature enough for this. I don’t think I still am, father.”

“Shukaku. I believe in you.” The entire mindscape trembled as two halves of a power descended from the god tree manifested to its

fullest extent, the sky that had steadily darkened over infinite years and no time at all shimmering with the silver of infinite auroras and the glowing light of a thousand constellations.

The multiverse spread out beneath them, the thousand pathways through samsara, resplendent in the light of the soul as Shukaku felt *weight* settle onto his very being, writing itself into the fabric of the universe the markings on his body shifted from black to opalescent, shimmering… Hagoromo hugged him one last time, standing on his own as his gudodama incorporated into Shukaku. “Remember me, son- as myself. No more, no less. Shukaku… I will always love you.” A last smile- and he dissipated to the infinite abyss of time.

Minato rested a hand on his own as the last glittering specks of a man who’d made the world, who’d saved it twice over and again- who’d saved them. The Sage of Six Paths died with a smile on his face. “...take your time. We have forever, here outside of reality.”

“No. No, they need us.” The gudodama pulled free of his self, swirling together as they bloomed like sand, writing a seal across the very essence of nothing and everything. Space yielded to his presence complete… “ *activate-* ”

Reality folded around them and as six paths senjutsu sung, they returned to earth.

They entered onto a battlefield, carnage unending as the earth for leagues and leagues lay decimated. Shinobi from every village poured chakra into immense collaborative jutsu, watching them deflect from the Kaguya. Kurama alone remained amongst the bijuu, bitterly firing bijuudama after bijuudama in conjunction with each attack, tails fluffed with victory each time the woman *bled* .

Shukaku landed to the death of all things, and *struck* . Gudodama swirled together with his bijuudama, power compounding as sand release chakra swept in. Five orbs and a shell of chakra, so much more than a bijuudama that it didn’t even deserve the name. Natural

chakra mixed in last of all, settling neatly into the locus of the battlefield as Kaguya raced towards them-

“God-” an attack that could wipe a nation of the map in a single hit. Something on the level of the eighty gods killing attack. “ *Gomokudama* .”

The skies exploded. A maelstrom of force, all the world crashing down on Kaguya as blades sharpened by space itself sliced through her body, smiting her physical form. “Now, Minato!” The flashed forward, two hands pressing to her side as hiraishin pulled them to Suna.

Kaguya stood frozen, moon and sun seal warring with Shukaku’s corruptive chakra to seal her away. She snarled, pulling together all the chakra she’d stored until the very fabric of space around them wavered with its sheer presence. “ *I*- will not *let you win* !”

Shukaku only smiled. “I already have. Nine star seal: activate-”

Far beneath the sands of Suna, a seal the size of wind country *exploded* with chakra- an oppressive force that pressed down against even Shukaku as it *bound* Kaguya. It incorporated parts of every seal in the series before it- seals to bind, shifting chakra to disrupt, stealing, *denying* - and most importantly, it had enough chakra stored within it to bind the soul of even Kaguya, eight star seal clinging to her soul without killing Shukaku in a second. The goddess *snarled* , furiously standing still as her ability to move- to even take action, was erased entirely.

Lines in the sand, cusped in their grasp the knife’s edge of existence.

All his work of centuries, and one more- the chakra of hundreds of years, stored for this very moment- golden bright, building as it slammed into Kaguya with enough force to sunder the sands and shine brighter than the sun.

Five more seconds-

Shukaku's gudodama divorced them from reality as a beam of pure chakra *obliterated* Kaguya.

They fell back to reality to see a bruised and broken Obito, rinnegan eye staring blankly at nothing at all as he bled from limbs that had literally been torn apart. "You killed her. Sensei- you *actually killed her* . Not even the Sage of Six Paths himself…"

Shukaku stepped up beside the man- the boy, really, gently splitting himself from Minato in the process. "For all the Sage's many skills… he wasn't a fuiinjutsu master. He did the best he could, at the time… but this was a better option, wasn't it?"

"You were right. You're always right… everything… I don't deserve this. I don't deserve for Kaguya's Inzanagi to have resurrected *me* instead. Kill me, Ichibi. *Kill me* ." Something deep in Shukaku ached so *badly* at that, a memory of what could have been, just… too late.

"This is my fault, Obito. It was never yours… it'll be better. I was too indecisive. I should… you're here now, though, and together-"

"I *felt* her. I felt her unending hunger… if she'd ever been named *Kaguya* , I don't think she was anymore. Just a malignant chakra construct, aiming for an impossible goal to destroy the world. I don't… I don't deserve this." A look of steel crossed his face, silent understanding crossing his eye in a moment. "Tell… tell Rin that I'm sorry. Tell bakakashi that… that this never should have happened." His eye gleamed with chakra, all his life force burning, gates thrown wide open in the instant before Minato could stop it- "I call upon the outer path: return the souls I damned!"

The world woke.

Somewhere in the land of lightning, the Raikage woke from a dream of eternal currents and silent unity, and quietly decided that this was probably his little brother's fault. What a nerve, daring to sacrifice himself to save Kumo.

He smiled, and watched the sunrise.

Rin and Kakashi gasped awake with chakra writhing beneath their fingers, panicked jutsu readied beneath their fingers as they realized they were *alive* . Somehow, impossibly- disintegrated by ash killing bones, and they were *alive* .

They embraced, laughing- tracing the lines of their Konoha headbands- the lines of the hash slash through the metal spelled out *shinobi.* The unofficial symbol of an unofficial alliance-

They knew things were going to be different.

Kushina watched the dead rise around her, and cried silent tears of joy.

"Hey- we're back, believe it! Nobody's gonna defeat the great-"

A hand shoved against his back, lightly playful- free of a weight they'd been carrying for a long, long time. "Shut up, dobe. We're in the middle of nowhere, still, and that creepy woman could still be around."

"Nah! Dad beat her up- ya know? Cause he's the bestest-"

"No. *Itachi* probably-"

"Teme!"

" *Dobe.* "

Shukaku slept, and dreamed.

He dreamed of a room- in turns too small and far too vast. The weight of all his memories- the bookshelf half full, fitted neatly with a side of random trinkets. Disgustingly mint-green paint, the color he'd always hated… scratches on the door, hanging posters and stacked textbooks. Beyond the open door a vast, empty plain stretched far into the distance.

Sighing, he settled back on the bed of his mindscape, feeling the faint prick of foreign chakra tense against his enhanced senses. Two figures settled on the chairs beside his desk- weary flames but flickering their last they looked up to him- silent. Sorrowful.

Shukaku glanced at each of them, instantly recognisable despite the thousand years he'd spent waiting. "Indra. Asura."

"I hate Zetsu *so much* ."

"Me too! I-" Asura looked at Shukaku and shrunk inwards on himself, barely able to even glance at him. "I… we just wanted to talk. This one last time. There's no need for us to hold on any longer, so…"

"We're leaving. To whatever Samsara may. Shukaku… we wanted to apologize. I know you may never forgive us for what we did to you- you *should* never forgive us for what we did to you, but… let your last memory of us be a happy one, alright?"

"Yeah! Like that time-" Indra whacked Asura gently over the head, and Shukaku couldn't help but smile. "Sorry, sorry- remember when I called wood release *tree release* ? I swear you were going to explode- or, or facepalm dramatically!"

"Yeah." His voice was a choked whisper. "Yeah, I remember." He didn't want to, but… as Hagoromo had to him. What kind of big brother would be if he didn't- "I forgive you, too. Even you, Asura. I'm not sure why you did- but…"

“Yeah, it was super weird! I was gonna, but then I stopped, and it was like- my chakra just *moved* -”

“Zetsu.” He laughed- warmly, *exhaustedly* . “It took your desire, your *need* to destroy me to save your family, and amplified it. He was always the smarter one of us all. Don’t feel bad about it.” All this time, and it’d been Zetsu. He didn’t want to cry, so he chose to laugh instead.

Indra stepped forward, hesitantly opening his arms into an embrace- and smiling as Shukaku hugged him back. “You were always the biggest influence in my life. The biggest influence in *any* of my lives… you know, you were an inspiration for our reincarnation.” Shukaku raised an eyebrow. “The edges of my mangekyou-” Indra winced softly as he said it- “caught these… dreams. I know you remembered my greatest mistakes, but I got the sense that you’d lived before. I so I decided- why not live again-”

“You rat bastard!” Asura leapt at Indra good-naturedly, outrage on his lips- “you made a reincarnation jutsu and were dumb enough to have it *sweep me along*? You-”

“I believe your current incarnations use the terms *bastard* and *dead last* .” Both brothers perked up at that before falling back into friendly bickering for a few more minutes… it felt, almost, like a family. Like all those years ago…

In the end, Asura and Indra grasped their hands together, embracing- pulling Shukaku as inexorably as they had ages ago. “Goodbye, brother… perhaps, one day, when the stars are cold and dim and chakra itself fails, we’ll see each other again.”

Sparks of light drifted off their forms as they began to dissolve, and Asura laughed, batting playfully at the lightshow. “See ya! Make sure to *live* - don’t take it all for granted. Live and live and live, until there’s nothing left to live for. Never give up. That’s my nindo.”

“I’ll remember… I’ll remember it forever.” How fitting, that it all came to a close, fully circle again. “Remember this, no matter how far you travel through samsara… remember that I will *always* love you.” They smiled- and Shukaku watched the last of his human family die.

The feeling he felt was *peace* .

That's a wrap! I might make a an epilogue later that explores a bit more of what happens after the fourth war, but all the plot related stuff's over and done with; the story's over. Everyone but Obito (poor obito) :(, lives, Kaguya gets obliterated with the power of foreshadowing, and Shukaku wraps things up with his brothers one last time. Also he's all shimmery and opalescent now :L

How'd you like the story? I'd love to hear feedback about the parts you liked and the parts that you feel could use work.

Additionally, I'm writing another story: Ootsutsuki Happenings. Essentially a (little less serious than this story) what-if of a friendly Ootsutsuki crash-landing on earth, ruining Zetsu's day, and accidentally adopting an eclectic array of characters. Check that out if you're interested.